



OLD SLEUTH WEEKLY

NO. 28

Price 5 cents

BLACK RAVEN, the Terror of the Georgia Moonshiners



by
**"OLD
SLEUTH"**



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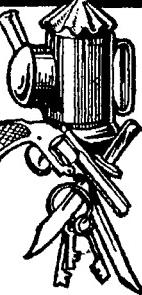
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OLD SLEUTH WEEKLY

A Series of

THE MOST THRILLING DETECTIVE STORIES EVER PUBLISHED



No. 28.

THE ARTHUR WESTBROOK COMPANY, CLEVELAND, U. S. A.
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Black Raven, the Terror of the Georgia Moonshiners OR The Mountaineers' Last Stand

By
“OLD SLEUTH.”

CHAPTER I.

“WELL, boys, I am here in your midst, and now, is it to be fight or fun?”

The speaker was one of the most magnificent specimens of manhood that ever slid into a buckskin shirt.

He was not gigantic in stature, but of good height and build, and possessed of a muscular power such as belongs to but few men in mortal form.

His hair was raven black, his complexion tawny, and, strangely enough, his eyes auro blue.

Harry Raven was but twenty-six, and yet, during his comparatively brief life, he had enjoyed a most remarkable experience.

His father had been a noted cavalry officer, who fell, sword in hand,

“With his back to the field,
And his feet to the foe!”

Harry was an only son, and at the age of twelve was left an orphan, and thrown upon his own resources. He had not a known relative in America, after the death of his mother, and the war had left so many orphans that the handsome youth was not by any means a solitary object of public sympathy.

A singular incident decided his career in life. The boy was in the employ of a farmer, and one morning, while in the woods, came upon the body of a murdered man.

Later discoveries indicated that the victim of the murder was a man of consequence, and the tragic incident became a celebrated case, and some of the most noted detectives were employed by the relatives of the victim.

Young Harry Raven, as the discoverer of the body, became an important factor in the search for the murderer; and the qualities he displayed led one of the most famous detectives to adopt him as his son and pupil; and thus it was that our hero stands to-day probably the only example of a man regularly trained from early childhood to the profession of a detective.

His adopted father and trainer was a tried and wonderful man, and the result was that our

hero, at the age of twenty-one, found himself inducted thoroughly into all the tricks and methods of one of the most famous thief-trackers who ever lived.

During a raid in the mountains, while on the track of a gang of illicit whisky distillers, Harry Raven's friend was ambuscaded, and shot down like a dog.

The tragedy caused a widespread sentiment of horror and indignation, and the result was that, while still but comparatively a boy, our hero was promoted to the dignity of a Government detective, and in a few years became even a greater terror to evil-doers than his famous master had ever been.

At the time our narrative opens the mooners were in the zenith of their altitude of power and defiance to the Government.

Secure in their mountain fastnesses, and aided by the countenance of men of influence—a class always purchasable with gold—they laughed at the powers that be, sneered at governors, intimidated judges, and murdered Government officials in cold blood.

A dozen United States detectives had gone down under their murderous rifles, and a score of detectives had penetrated to their fastnesses only to leave their bones a grinning testimony to the power of an organized band of criminals.

In different States the Government aided by several detectives (the exploits of one or two of which it has been our pleasure to record), succeeded to a certain extent in breaking up the terrible combinations, but in the section where our narrative opens the traffic had gone on; the forces of the dealers had been augmented by recruits from the localities where the business had been destroyed, until at the time we write, the strength of the dealers of the Government had become so formidable as to almost portend a civil war.

Government officials began to despair of ever overcoming and suppressing the fraternity, and, indeed, it had become difficult to secure men to dare the dangers and perils of a visit to the district.

Harry Raven, who, despite his elegant blue

eyes, had earned the sobriquet of Black Raven, was assigned to special duty, when no other man could be induced to take the job.

Black Raven went to work after a manner of his own, and during the course of a year had become the terror of the law-breakers. He had trailed down several individual and prominent criminals; had produced them in court, and had furnished the evidence which resulted in their conviction and execution; and so terrible had become his silent and stealthy trailings, that dozens of gangs on bended knees had kissed their naked knives and sworn his life away; but the daring detective still remained in their midst, appearing and disappearing at will, until, as stated, he had become the living terror of the banded criminals.

A day or two previous to the appearance, like an apparition, of our hero in the midst of a portion of the gang, as described in our opening paragraphs, it had become rumored that the detective was to appear in a certain quarter, and the several gangs had combined to place guards at several points to ambuscade him and shoot him at sight, as they had a few years previously his unfortunate adopted father.

Black Raven at the time was on the track of a prominent individual who, under a false pretense, had shot down a leading citizen in cold blood.

The man in question had *prefered* to be an apostle of the mooners, in order to claim a refuge and protection in their midst, while in fact his crime had been the carrying out of a private personal grudge.

For three months our hero had been upon the man's track, and several times had trifled close to his “cover,” when through the aid of the mooners he had been spirited away.

Matters thus stood when the incident occurred with which we open our story.

Three men had been stationed all night close to a private lane, which led up to a villa residence occupied by an eccentric French gentleman and his only child, a daughter whose beauty was famed all over the State, together with her varied accomplishments.

A rumor had gone abroad among the mooners that Black Raven was a visitor at the house of the mysterious French gentleman, M. Henri Aumal, and the news determined to take advantage of the rumor to bait the detective and lure him on to his death.

The method adopted by the wily conspirators was a mean one, as it involved a gentleman whom they knew was innocent of any act against them, but, in their hatred and fear of Black Raven, they would have slain the innocent from infancy to old age, in order to reach and draw the heart's blood of the man who had become to them a living terror and a terrible scourge.

CHAPTER II.

THERE was a mystery connected with the Frenchman, Henri Aumal, that had never been solved.

Some sixteen years previous to the opening of our narrative, he had purchased the land on which he subsequently erected a handsome villa. He had furnished the residence in an elegant manner, as was reported by the few who had enjoyed the privilege of a peep within his doors.

Upon the completion of the residence, M. Aumal had taken up his residence in the mansion, his household consisting of a few servants, and a lovely little girl of five summers. The gentleman was always courteous when he met any of his neighbors along the roads, but during all the years of his residence, he had never given or accepted any social invitations.

Five years after his original appearance, and when the little girl, who was recognized as his daughter, was about ten years old, the Frenchman disappeared for a year, and when he returned, he appeared alone.

Inquiries of the French servants failed to elicit any information as to what had become of the beautiful child, and nothing was known of her fate until ten years later, when the moonie once more disappeared for a few months, and when he again returned, he was accompanied by a beautiful young lady of twenty summers, who, the gossips announced, was the same child now grown to womanhood, who had been carried away, in such a mysterious manner, ten years previously.

There were all sorts of rumors afloat as to the position and identity of M. Henri Aumal.

Some said he was one of the Orleans or Bourbon princes who had fled from France at the time of the assumption of imperial power by Louis Napoleon; others said he was a Bonaparte, but all agreed in the belief and statement that he was a man of title and position in his native land.

Upon the return of the Frenchman with his reputed daughter he had several times accepted invitations to the receptions of distinguished citizens, and thus the fame of the beauty and accomplishments of the remarkable French girl had gone abroad.

M. Henri Aumal did not live within twenty miles of the section where the mooners had established themselves, and in no manner had it ever been suggested that he was in any way pronounced for or against the banded law breakers.

One evening M. Aumal and his daughter were seated upon the balcony of his residence enjoying the beauties of sunset, when a horseman passed the gate opening from the road, galloped up to the steps leading to the piazza, and, dismounting, ascended to their presence.

What struck the Frenchman as remarkable was the fact that the man was masked.

Advancing to the monsieur the stranger said:

"I have a note for you, sir."

Laying the note upon the gentleman's lap, the mysterious visitor descended the steps, mounted his horse, and rode away without essaying one word beyond the sentence above quoted.

M. Aumal had been too amazed to observe and examine the letter until the man had disappeared.

A pallor overspread his face as he remarked, in French, "What does this mean?" and he opened the letter.

The missive was a terrible note of warning, worded as follows:

"MONSIEUR AUMAL,— Your treachery has been discovered. Leave, or your home will be burned, and you and your daughter murdered.

"A FRIEND."

M. Aumal was no coward—indeed, he was an old soldier, a man who had faced many perils—and, upon perceiving the purport of the note, he calmly tore it up, scattered the pieces, and, in answer to his daughter's inquiry, "What is it, papa?" merely answered:

"Nothing."

To explain the delivery of the note, it is necessary once more to refer to the incident attending the opening of our narrative. We will here state, also, that Black Raven had made the acquaintance of Aumal and his lovely daughter under remarkable and tragic circumstances, as will be related as our narrative proceeds; and the detective was the only American who had been entertained at the Frenchman's board during all the long residence of the mysterious man in his splendid villa.

We have stated that three men had been stationed all night near a lane which branched off from the turnpike and led up to a private road which bordered the grounds of M. Aumal.

The three men were all noted rascals, upon whose heads a price was set. The outlaws had been specially selected to commit the contemplated murder.

As has been intimated, rumors had connected Black Raven as a visitor to the house of M. Aumal, and rumor had gone further in circulating the story of romantic connection between the handsome and famous detective and the beautiful daughter of France.

The mooners believing the rumors, had come to a devilish and cunning determination. They resolved to serve upon the Frenchman a threatening missile, under the impression that the receiver of the mystic note would naturally communicate at once with Black Raven, and through the note the detective would be baited to the house, thus giving the ambuscaders a chance to lay him out when the terrible man was off his guard.

It was designed to be a deliberate and cold-blooded murder; the intended victim was to have no chance for his life, but was to be shot down like a mangy dog; and it was for the purpose above indicated that the wretches had lain in wait during the long hours of two nights, and there they were to wait until their victim appeared.

The men had no idea that Black Raven would appear in the open daylight, but calculated he would come stealthily at night.

As the gray dawn of the second morning began to break one of the men said:

"Well, boys, we will have another night of it."

One of the men, who was a recruit, as it were, remarked:

"Dang his buttons! I wish he had showed up. I just wanted to show you how little Crab Allen cared for this man who has chased you fellows like a shepherd dog barking agin a flock of frightened sheep."

"You don't know the man; and although I count myself good in a scrimmage, I've been hoping all along that Raven wouldn't show up on our watch!"

The fellow Crab Allen rolled his eyes in surprise as he exclaimed:

"Do you mean to tell me you did not want the man to show up while we were 'laying low' here to take him dead unawares?"

"That's the way I've been feeling about it!"

"I wish Black Raven was here at this moment!" said Crab Allen, and at that very moment Black Raven appeared.

CHAPTER III.

HAD a ghastly, wound-scarred apparition suddenly risen from the ground appeared in their midst, the supernatural visitant could not have caused greater consternation than did the startling appearance of Black Raven.

He had overheard the words of Crab Allen. The detective knew the desperado, but the latter did not know our hero as Black Raven.

Crab Allen was a desperate scoundrel. He had originally been a cowboy, one of those wretches to whom murder had been a pastime.

It was he who had expressed a desire to meet Black Raven and almost upon the instant Black Raven appeared.

When asking the question, "Shall it be fight or fun?" the detective had directed the question more particularly to Allen, he having, as stated, overheard the man's boastful declaration.

A moment the detective stood silent, and then said:

"I have been looking for you a long time, Crab Allen." The announcement was the more startling because of the fact that the detective had called the man by name.

As intimated, Crab Allen was a new accession to the ranks of the mooners in that particular section.

"You have been looking for me?"

"Yes."

"And you will take me?"

"I will take you."

Crab Allen stepped back a pace, and answered:

"Not to-day, love; some other day! Thank you, ta, ta!"

"Then it's fight, boys," declared Black Raven, and there came a threatening blaze in his magnificent eyes.

The fellow recognized the drift of the game, and answered:

"I am willing to so take it," and, quick as a wink, he sprung at the detective.

The latter, quicker than a flash, swung his arm downward, and the butt of a pistol came with crashing force upon Allen's head, and the man fell limp and lifeless at the detective's feet.

The detective's triumph was but momentary.

A shout was heard; there came the sound of a gunshot and the rush of hurrying feet.

The detective sprung across the path, and disappeared with one bound over a high hedge, and the next instant there came the rattle of a volley of pistol shots.

At least twenty mooners had suddenly and unaccountably appeared upon the scene. Curse filled the air; the men were in force, and correspondingly brave.

Meantime Black Raven had bounded away toward the cover of wood that lay some three quarters of a mile distant. In his flight he kept to the cover of the hedge.

The men surrounded the wood, and a thorough search followed. Every foot of ground was traversed but nothing could be seen of the singular man, who seemed to possess the faculty of appearing and disappearing at will.

A part of the men at length met in council, the balance having been thrown out as skirmishers, in order to keep up a constant watch.

"Well, boys," said the leader, "Raven has given us the slip again."

"It's my idea," said one of the men, "that we ought to increase our force, guard every square foot of ground, and wait."

"We can do better than that," suggested another of the men.

"What's your idea?"

"Send for the hounds, and put them on the scent; and when he's hunted out, we can ride him as we would a black bear run out from its cover."

The latter idea appeared to suit all hands.

It was a remarkable fact that the subject of the conversation above recorded was a listener to the conversation.

Black Raven had made several visits to the house of M. Aumal, and several times he had been closely trailed, and upon one occasion he had resorted to a trick of his own, and had hunted up a cover.

By a method of his own he had found a hollow tree, but it was a long time before he discovered the opening; but, after a steady search, he had struck the aperture.

The display of a little mechanical ingenuity had enabled the detective to make a wonderful cover indeed. All over the section he had improvised just such hiding-places, and it was by the means indicated that he had succeeded in so often mystifying different gangs of pursuers.

CHAPTER IV.

WHEN Black Raven fled to the wood, he made straight for his cover. He ascended like a cat the hollow tree, and fell suddenly from view, safe against discovery from mortals; but, alas; when he heard the proposition to lay the bounds on the scent, he recognized his peril.

The men had squatted round the tree in which the detective was hidden, they were waiting for the hounds, and the moment approached when they might expect the arrival of the savage animals; indeed, Black Raven had already given himself over for a lost man, and he had determined to crawl up and drop down into the midst of his foes and die like a man, when a diversion beamed in his favor.

There came the report of a gun. In an instant all the mooners gathered around the tree were on their feet, and all sped away in the direction whence the gun-shot had sounded.

Black Raven had been upon the alert, and quick as a flash he crawled to the top of his mount, cast one glance around, and descended to the ground.

With a bounding step he dashed away—ran across the very ground over which he had been hunted and made his way toward the mansion of M. Aumal, crossing in his journey the very spot where he had so strangely appeared to Crab Allen and his companions.

The gun-shot proved to have been an accidental discharge, but it had occurred at the right moment, as the gang returned to their camp-ground, as it were, the hounds were produced.

The animals were put to the scent, and, as it proved, it was an easy trail, as within a half hour from the time Black Raven had issued forth, the dogs had set up a signal howl at the base of the tree.

The mooners were all woodsmen, and at once "tumbled to the scheme." Their wicked faces glowed with savage delight; indeed, no tribe of Comanches ever danced around a tortured victim in higher glee than did these men at the anticipation of horror they had in store for the man who for months had been their very scourge and living terror.

All hands were soon busy, and a pile of combustibles almost mountain high, as it were, was piled around the trunk of the tree.

One of the men had climbed the tree, and had discovered the aperture, and had also discovered traces of the recent presence of a "skulker," and so assured was he that he descended with his face all aglow, and had announced with an oath,

"Boys, he's there! We've got him, dead sure!"

The fire was kindled, and soon a blaze ran round the tree trunk with a fierce and terrible roar, and the men stood by to behold Black Raven come stealing up, like a worm burned out of its crevice; or, what would have proved more pleasing, they listened for the agonized yell of the victim.

It was two hours before the great tree burned through and fell, and even then the men were compelled to use their axes. At length, however, it went over, a jagged and smoking hollow stump pointed skyward, and the men gathered round to gaze in on the ghastly horror it was hoped and believed the crackling fire had left behind.

It would have filled their souls with savage joy to have beheld a roasted detective; but no such sight greeted their fiendish gaze.

Some further time elapsed before the men were fully satisfied that they had been fooled; that their devilish scheme, after all, was but savage labor lost.

When at length fully convinced, the men stood and gazed into one another's faces in a perplexed manner.

"Boys," said one of them, "we're beat again!"

"Hang the dogs, they've fooled—"

"No, no, the dogs were all right; we deceived ourselves; the hounds took the tree only as the starter for a scent."

"Start 'em in again on the trail, we've yet got Black Raven dead to rights!" came the command.

The hounds were once more put to the scent, but it was a short trail. Black Raven knew the animals were at his heels, and he of all men was just the man to throw a scent against all the hounds in Georgia.

Meantime our hero had made his way to the home of the Frenchman; the house stood in the midst of trees and flowers, and all the surroundings wore an air of quiet peacefulness and security, and nowhere was there a pretension of the terrible tragedies that would desolate the scene within a few hours.

Black Raven entered the house unannounced, and proceeding to the drawing-room, was met and greeted by the master of the house.

"I am glad you are here," said M. Aumal: "I wish to consult with you."

"You have received a warning?"

"Yes?"

"It don't amount to anything."

"You know of it?"

"Yes."

"That is strange."

"No, it is not strange. I will explain to you how I came to know of it, but as I said it don't amount to anything, and—"

The words of the detective were interrupted in the most startling and thrilling manner by the sudden entrance into the room of one of the loveliest girls mortal eyes ever rested upon.

The girl's arrival in the room was announced by a piercing scream. She fell to the floor dead or in a dead swoon, and as she fell the detective observed with a thrill of horror that caused his own heart to stand still that the young girl was wounded.

CHAPTER V.

BLACK RAVEN drew his pistols. It was his impression that the gang had trailed him, and he resolved to meet them in a desperate combat.

The detective did not stop to make inquiries, but ran to the great door leading from the plaza, and closed it. Behind that door he could make a desperate fight and hold the gang at bay.

Calmly Black Raven awaited the approach of the riders, but none appeared, and, after some time, he returned to the drawing-room, where he had left the Frenchman with his child.

Alvia Aumal had been restored to consciousness, and was relating to her father the cause of her alarm.

The girl had been walking in an orchard near the mansion, when suddenly, from behind a tree, she had been approached by a masked man.

The ruffian had presented a cocked revolver, and in gruff tones had said:

"You are Miss Aumal?"

The girl summoned sufficient strength to answer:

"I am Miss Aumal."

"You are a friend of Black Raven?" the man had said, when the girl made answer:

"Black Raven is my father's friend."

"He is at your father's house now?"

"No."

"Girl," said the man, with an oath, "it is useless for you to attempt to deceive me!"

The girl had answered:

"I speak truly; Harry Raven is not at our house. He has not been there for many days. I do not know when he will come."

The man rolled out a volley of curses, and said:

"I will give you just one minute to tell me when Black Raven is to visit your house! If you do not answer me truthfully, I will kill you!"

A sudden impulse caused the girl to break away, when there came a flash and report; the ruffian had fired upon the innocent and beautiful maiden; the bullet had furrowed her temple, and as she ran the warm blood had flowed down upon her fair bosom and had stained the white dress in which her delicate form was clad.

Black Raven stood by and listened to the girl's narrative, and when she had concluded, he asked:

"Did you see the man's face?"

"No."

"Was he a tall or a short man?"

The girl proceeded and gave an accurate description of the man in every particular, save as to his face.

The description was accurate enough to indicate to Black Raven the man's identity.

The fellow was a similar character to Crab Allen, and, if possible, more blood thirsty and brutal. He was a half-breed Mexican, a man who had been born a gentleman, and had once been an officer in the Mexican army; but his lawlessness had led to his being cashiered. He had subsequently been engaged in the slave trade, and when the calling had become either too perilous or unprofitable, he had gravitated down to a common gambler and horse-thief, and finally, with stolen "swag," had bought an interest in an illicit distillery.

As a distiller, he had become comparatively rich, and at the time our story opens he was the leader of one of the worst gangs of lawless men who ever infested a respectable community.

The man's name was Andres Sarto, but he was more generally known as Andy the Mex.

Black Raven and Andy the Mex had never met. The detective had long desired to face the rascal, but he was not the man to boastfully give out his wish; while, on the contrary, Andy the Mex made it a daily boast that Black Raven kept out of his way, and that all he desired was a meeting, eye to eye, hand to hand,

and knife to knife with the scourge of the mooners.

Fate, however, had never thrown the two men together.

As stated, Black Raven had listened to the girl's story, and at once he came to a decided determination.

To M. Aumal he said:

"I fear, sir, your kind entertainment of my humble self upon several occasions has brought this trouble upon you; but I do not believe the ruffian really mean to do you any harm, and, in future, do not permit yourself to brave any peril in my behalf. I will not visit your house again until these lawless men are subdued, and I can do so in safety as far as you are concerned; and, meantime, do not withhold any information concerning me; should these rascals visit you, tell all you know about me, so that you may avoid incurring their hatred."

"Sir," returned the Frenchman, "you do not know me. I am an old soldier. I am not to be intimidated by a gang of miserable marauders; from me they will get no information, and you are welcome to the shelter of my house any time you choose to avail yourself of my ever-ready hospitality!"

"Remember your child, sir; already you have had an intimation of the character of the danger which menaces you!"

"My child shall be sent away, but I, sir, will remain here, and I will defend my honor and my property at all hazards and against all comers!"

"Your daughter shall go away?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"At once."

"I can not ask you to desert your property, and your daughter once removed I can safely assure you that I believe all present peril will be over; but remove her at once!"

The detective held some further talk with M. Aumal, and more fully explained the situation, as it has already been opened up to our readers.

Having made matters plain and clear to the Frenchman, our hero stepped forth to seek the long-desired meeting with the terrible man, Andy the Mex.

CHAPTER VI.

OUR hero passed from M. Aumal's house by a rear door. He took to a hedge, and made his way to the barn, and some twenty minutes later a round-shouldered, age-feeble old negro came hobbling out.

The old negro had a hoe in his hand, and busied himself over a flower bed.

We will have our readers understand that not more than half an hour altogether had passed since the moment when Black Raven entered M. Aumal's house and the instant the old negro appeared, hoe in hand, digging away at the flower bed.

The negro had been at work but a few moments, when he was joined by M. Aumal.

"My good fellow," demanded the Frenchman, "who set you to work?"

"Mr. Ballard, sah. Yer see, Mr. Ballard he hab a touch ob de rheumatics; but he knowed dat dar war some hoin' needed ober here, so he jes' sent dis yore ole chile ober to do it! Dat am all dar is about it, sah!"

Mr. Ballard was an old man, whom the Frenchman had employed to take care of his kitchen and garden; and the answer of the old negro was satisfactory, as was also his authority to hoe away till sundown; and he did so away until sundown, and during that time all seemingly appeared as quiet and unthreatening as though the mansion stood upon the banks of a river running between the banks of the celestial shore.

The old negro had been hoeing away in the most commonplace and conventional manner for many hours, when a man, outwardly of very ordinary appearance, came along the road and leaned over against the fence opposite where the negro was at work.

"Do you live here?" asked the man.

"No, sah!"

"Are you acquainted around here?"

"Yes, sah."

"What is the name of the man who lives in that house?"

"Don't know."

"Who set you to work?"

"Mr. Ballard."

"Who is Mister Ballard?"

"De gardener."

"You have seen a young lady around here?"

"Yes, sah."
"Have you seen her to-day?"
"Yes, sah, I seed her when she wer gwine away."
"Going away!"
"Yes, sah."

A fierce light flashed in the eyes of the questioner as he said:

"Look here, old man, you're lying!"
"G'long; I've done talkin' wid yer when yer calls dis yere ole chile a liar!"
"You are a liar! You say the young lady has gone away; I know better!"
"Ef yer know so much, what makes yer come around heah askin' questions?"

"For fun."
"Hope yer enjoyed yersel'."
"You're saucy, you ugly nigger!"
"Ges I'se o'c enough ter be saucy!"
"If I had you out here in the road I'd throw you over into dat ditch!"
"Golly! yer wouldn't hab said so much ter dis yere chile few years ago!"

"I've a good mind to wollop you, anyhow, you old rascal!"

"Golly! what makes yer so mighty anxious ter wollop me, yer rascal?"

"What! you dare call me a rascal?"
"Yer called dis yere chile names fus! Golly! I ges I'se as good a right ter call names as yer hab! I don't tink you're anybody, anyhow. Some white trash, I ges, out on a scission, puttin' on airs! But I ain't got no time ter talk ter yer, I ain't. Ges yer am a fraud. Bet go off 'bout yer business; yer ain't wort a cent, nohow; so, g'long!"

Having spit out his venom, the old darky walked around to the barn.

It was near sundown, and about time to discontinue work.

As the old darky walked along he muttered to himself:

"Golly, Monsieur Aumal am delayin' too long! Blimby it will be night, and too late to take de gal away, an' it's de pinion ob dis yere chile dat dem yere ruffians are losin' round heah wid bad intentions."

The old man had just reached the barn, when a dark figure leaped from the path and stood before him.

"You live here?" came the inquiry from a young negro lad.

"Yes, sah, I libbs here."
"I've got something ter tell yer."
"Well, go ahead, boy, go ahead!"
"Am Black Raven in dat yer house?"
"Does yer call dat information?"

"Black Raven am de man dat I'se gwine ter gib de information to, so yer kin jes' tell me am me in dat yere house."

"No, sah; Black Raven ain't in dat yere house! What de debbil would Black Raven be doin' in dat yere house? He don't libbe dat!"

"But he comes aroun' heah."

"No, sah!"

"Why don't yer tell de trufe, old man?"

"I'se tellin' yer de trufe; but come in de barn, honey, I jes' wants ter talk wid yer."

The young negro followed the elder man into the barn, and once inside the latter said:

"Now, look heah, honey, yet jes' tell ole gran'father why yer lookin' fer Black Raven?"

"I'se got news for him."

"Are yer a fren' ob Black Raven?"

"Yes."

"Why are yer his fren'?"

"Case I'm arvin' der mooners."

"Look out, chile, don't speak dat yere loud, can't tell who might be lyin' aroun'; and now yer jes' listen! I'se a fren' ob Black Raven, I'se well acquainted wid him. I knows jes' what to fine him, and ef yer hab got any information fer de Raven yer kin gib it tur me and I'll jes' repeat what yer say in de right quarter."

"Der am a gang of mooners down in de wood."

"Am dat so?"

"Yes."

"What am dey doin' down dar?"

"Dey hab got 'n idea dat Black Raven am in dat yere house. Dey daresn't come up in de daylight; but dey am comin' up in de night ter burn down de house and murder everybody in it—all but de young lady."

"Dey am gwine ter spare de young lady?"

"Yes."

"Hicw am dat?"

"It 'pears dat am dere orders; one ob de mooners, a big bug, hab gone sweet on de pretty lady. But dey am gwine to murder everybody else!"

"What time am dey comin'?"

"Bout midnight!"

"All right, honey; ef I come across Black Raven, I'se jes' gwine ter tell him what yer say."

When once alone the old negro indulged a few moments' muttered soliloquy, when he was startled by hearing a wild cry for help. With a bound which did not comport with his appearance of feeble old age, he ran from the stable, and hastened in the direction from whence the cry had come. Some three hundred feet distant from the barn in a field he saw the dim outlines of a man's form.

The old negro ran to the spot and a horrible sight met his gaze. Upon the ground lay the body of the negro boy who had brought the information concerning the intention of the mooners. The lad was stone dead.

The old negro started in pursuit of, and speedily overtook the cold-blooded assassin, who was not making any particular effort to hasten away.

"Fore de Lord! hole on dar!" called the old negro. "What did yer go slaughter der boy for?"

The man turned, and with a bound sprung toward the old negro, but he was brought to a sudden halt.

A curse fell from the lips of the assassin; indeed, curses are the most frequent utterances of such wretches. The fellow had thought to have murdered the old negro as easily as he had killed the younger man.

"Hold on, dar!" exclaimed the old negro.

"Yer ain't gwine ter murder dis yere chile!"

"You old fool! How dare you draw a weapon on me?"

"D. I'se jes' what I'm darin' boss; and I'se gwine ter ask yer why yer killed dat yere innocent boy!"

"For the same reason that I'm going to kill you!"

"Yer ain't gwine ter kill dis yere chile, boss, nohow; an' while yer hab time, ef yer are a prayin' man, yer hab better get down to yer sacred. 'Kase dis yere chile am gwine ter execute yer! I'se Judge Lynch, I is; I'se der judge, der jury, and der executioner, and as I ain't got neither rope nor time, I'se jes' gwine ter execute yer wid dis yere shinin' knifel!"

The villain stood and gazed aghast at the negro, who spoke as calmly and confidently as though he were an avenging angel himself, above the power and out of the dominion of death.

Another startling fact presented itself. The round-shouldered, feeble old negro had, in the most strange and remarkable manner, developed into an upright, stalwart-looking man; his form had become erect, there was no tremor in his limbs, and there shone a blaze in his eyes, which had suddenly become blue, such as never brightened the orbs of feeble old age.

"Come, come ole man, yer hab got no time ter fool! Confession am good for de soul! Why did yer murder de boy dar?"

The assassin, when he had first sprung at the old negro, had looked fierce and confident, but suddenly the gleam of fierceness had faded from his eyes, the color from his cheek, and the sturdiness from his voice.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Golly! dat don't make no difference to you who I is. I'se der executioner—I'se der jury—I'se Judge Lynch; an' yer am a doomed man, se jes' come alng!"

"Black Raven!" muttered the man between his teeth; and, as he spoke, the expression upon his brutal face became ghastly.

"Come, ole man, are yer gwine ter be launched widout one plea for mercy?"

The man stood face to face with doom, and, at the last moment, recalled one pulse of nerve,

by whose hand you die, for you are a doomed man!"

The detective spoke as a white man, in calm, deliberate terrible tones.

"I have no quarrel with you!"

"Assassin! you lie! You murdered that poor negro boy because he had spoken a word to save my life! You have been prowling around here to meet me, but you did not desire to meet me as we now stand! I would be justified in dropping you in your tracks, but I can not down such a cold-blooded wretch as you are without giving you a chance—without putting my life in the balance against yours!"

"I can give better points than the boy gave you!"

"You should have come with your information before you murdered the boy!"

"I killed the boy to save my own life!"

"How was your life in danger?"

"The boy assaulted me, and in self-defense I was compelled to down him!"

"You are the unclean-spirited scoundrel I ever encountered. Wretched man, you lie!"

While the above significant dialogue was in progress, the man whom Black Raven, disguised as an old negro, had confronted, had been retreating step by step, and the detective had so advanced as the man moved backward.

Black Raven did not start in pursuit. It was just in the gray of the twilight when the combat occurred, and as the detective moved backward from over the dead form of the man who had been the assassin of the negro boy, he heard a voice.

Instinctively the gallant man clutched once more the hilt of his knife, when he recognized the pale face of M. Aumal peering at him.

The Frenchman had drawn a pistol, and the muzzle covered the heart of Black Raven.

"Scoundrel!" exclaimed the Frenchman in his broken English, "why have you done this murder?"

"Monsieur Aumal, we are surrounded by a hundred perils!"

The Frenchman's face assumed a ghastly hue, and he started back with an exclamation of amazement.

"Monsieur Raven?"

"I am."

"What does this all mean, monsieur?"

"Sir, I have a terrible tale to tell."

"And the warning note was a real menace?"

"I had thought, sir, that the note was only intended as bait to inveigle me into a net, but I have learned that there was another motive prompting the message. Just beyond where we stand lies the body of a dead negro boy; the boy had come to bring certain information to you of an impending peril, and he has paid the penalty with his life!"

"What horror is this I am listening to, monsieur?"

"The murdered boy was lying in the bush, when he overheard a consultation between a gang of the riders; it was decided that this night, at midnight, a raid should be made upon your house, and all the inmates murdered, but one!"

"Which one was to be spared?"

"Your daughter!"

"And you decide?"

"That the ruffians, under the guidance of some foul villain, trumped up one pretense only to accomplish a devilish scheme!"

A moment's silence followed the detective's explanation, broken at length by the Frenchman, who said:

"You think there is reason to dread a real peril?"

"I do. When I thought the matter an ordinary threat, I did not suspect danger; but it is evident that the instigator of the scheme has a purpose."

"They are not to come until midnight?"

"It appears that was the original hour decided upon, but they may change the time since the combat. But tell me, why did you not take your daughter away, as you said you would?"

The Frenchman was thoughtful a moment, but at length said:

"There were reasons why I could not do so, but I will remove her at once."

"I fear it is too late!"

"Too late?"

"Yes."

"How so?"

"I have information that every path leading from your house is guarded and watched by a part of the gang of assassins."

CHAPTER VII.

"Who are you?" once more demanded the assassin.

"Golly! ain't I tol' yer? I'se Judge Lynch, de judge, de jury, and de executioner!"

"Black Raven, I know you!"

"Do you, scoundrel? Well, it's well to know

"Monsieur Raven, what shall I do?"
"Trust your daughter to me."
"And you?"
"I will carry her to a place of safety."
"Could we not defend the man on against them? I have plenty of arms."

"We can not defend your house successfully; there are too many of those rascals. Two pair of hands can only pull two triggers at a time, and they would burn us out."

"Do you think they would spare my house if I were to desert it?"

"I fear your house is doomed."

"My child shall go with you," said the Frenchman.

"Go, sir, to the house. I will join you in a few moments; meantime tell Alvia she is to go with me."

M. Aumal returned to his house, and a few moments later Black Raven entered.

The detective had transformed himself once more. He was a white man, but bore little resemblance to the Black Raven as he appeared when confronting the three men, as described in the opening paragraph of our story.

The detective had just entered the house, when he was called upon to face a second peril.

One of the men laid his hand on the disguised Black Raven's shoulder and said, in a harsh, gruff voice:

"Come, old man, *parlez vous*, we want a few moments' private talk with you."

"What is your business with me, gentlemen? This is a private house; you are strangers and uninvited guests."

The detective spoke in most excellent broken English; indeed, his pronunciation was as perfect an imitation as his appearance.

"We did not think it necessary to wait for an invitation under all the circumstances; so come along."

"This is a strange proceeding. I can not understand why a peaceful citizen's home is thus invaded."

"Will you come into yonder room and learn?"

"Tell me here. I repeat I do not desire to entertain men who come to me in this rough manner."

"Old man, I do not want to kill you; but blast me, if you try my patience too far, down you go!"

"You are not welcome, but come on."

The disguised detective led the three men into the lighted drawing-room. Our hero knew that a tragedy was imminent, and he was calmly prepared for the fearful contingencies.

The air and manner of the men were overbearing and ruffianly, and, indeed, exceedingly dictatorial. They seated themselves without waiting to be invited, and one of them said:

"I suppose you are surprised at our visit?"

"I am."

"Well, sir, you have been entertaining in your house an outlaw—a desperado!"

"I do not understand you, gentlemen."

"You have a guest in your house at this moment?"

"No, sir."

"You recently had a guest here, and he is not far off, even though he may not be under your roof at this moment."

"As a quiet citizen, have I not the right to entertain a guest?"

"You have the right to entertain a guest, but you have no right to harbor an outlaw."

"I am not aware that I have harbored an outlaw."

"We will come right down to business. Black Raven is your guest."

"Do you call Monsieur Raven an outlaw?"

"Yes."

"I had supposed he was a Government officer, and that it was his duty to run down and capture outlaws."

"Well you are mistaken; and now answer me: Where is Black Raven?"

"As a quiet citizen, I can not tell you."

"You lie!" came the ruffianly response. The disguised detective remained silent.

"Will you tell us where to find the rascal, Black Raven?"

"I can not tell you."

"You shall tell us, and at once?"

"I can not tell you."

"Are you prepared to die?"

"About as well as most honest men."

"You may think that we only mean to scare you, but you are mistaken."

"I know nothing about your intentions; indeed, your ruffianly language and behavior would prepare me to expect any sort of violence."

The three ruffians looked into one another's face in an inquiring manner. It was evident that they were greatly disappointed; they had anticipated seeing the Frenchman display more fear and terror.

"Your language is insulting," declared the man.

"Your conduct since you have been in my house has not been such as to demand any particular consideration at my hands."

"Where is your daughter?"

"None of your business."

"Listen! you produce Black Raven, or we will take your daughter as a hostage!"

"What has my child to do with your search for Black Raven?"

"We are not called upon to make any explanations."

"Neither am I called upon to give you any information."

"We have no time to waste."

"The door through which you entered is open. Depart as you came!"

The three men drew their weapons, but the pretended Frenchman did not show any signs of alarm, although it was a critical moment.

"We mean business, old man."

"You had better go about your business, then."

"We shall search this house. That is our business."

"On what pretense will you search my house?"

"We are on the track of Black Raven."

"You will not find him here."

"If we do not find Raven, we will burn your dwelling down."

"You are bold-faced rascals to tell a man you will burn down his house."

"That is what we will do!"

"Are you criminals?"

"It does not matter what we are, that's our purpose!"

"It's your declared purpose to burn down my house?"

"Yes."

"On what plea?"

"We are not making any explanations."

"You had better get down to your devilish work then, at once!"

The men were more and more amazed.

"See here, old man, you can save your house."

"How?"

"Produce Black Raven."

"If I produce him, will you spare my house?"

"Yes."

"Gentlemen, I am Black Raven!"

CHAPTER VIII.

WHEN Black Raven entered the room where father and daughter were consulting, there were two M. Aumals in the room.

The real M. Aumal, upon beholding his second, uttered an exclamation of surprise, as did his daughter. The make-up was perfect; had Black Raven stood before a glass, and had the real Frenchman been glancing into the mirror, he would have readily believed he was gazing on his own reflection.

The monsieur uttered an exclamation of surprise, and Black Raven smiled as he said:

"Will I pass for your daughter's kind father?"

"It is the greatest wonder that ever came under my observation!" exclaimed the Frenchman.

"Good! I serve two purposes by my disguise. I hope to save both you and your child."

The girl spoke up and said:

"I am grateful for your generous offer to carry me beyond danger, but I can not leave papa."

"The peril of the moment," said the detective, "demands that I speak plainly. A fate worse than death threatens you—the most terrible fate that can befall a woman—and against the odds your father is helpless to defend or save you. Indeed, miss, your only safety lies in flight with me."

She was about to make a reply to the detective's declaration, when steps and voices were heard upon the piazza.

Upon hearing the heavy steps and voices without, a parlor overspread the detective's face, and in a low, startled tone, he ejaculated:

"They are here! I fear we have delayed too long!"

There came a heavy rap at the outer door.

The Frenchman drew a revolver, but in a commanding tone the detective said:

"No, no, not yet! We must not provoke the fight, or give them the shadow of an excuse for the inauguration of their devilish plans! Leave all to me! Remember now I am Monsieur Aumal! Take your child," he continued; "go to an upper room, and wait a signal from me as to your course of action. I will meet these men and may succeed in fooling them, and in persuading them to give over their murderous purpose."

Meantime the rapping and banging at the great door continued, and the moment our hero was alone he passed into the hall, walked to the door, and threw it open.

Three men stalked across the threshold, without saying, "by your leave and license."

CHAPTER IX.

THE disguised detective was facing three heavily armed villains, and yet, in making the startling announcement of his identity, he spoke as coolly as though merely announcing his presence to a company of genuine gentlemen.

The three rascals, however, did not receive the announcement in as cool a manner as it was made.

They were mortals, and the terror the detective's name and presence inspired was most wonderfully indicated by the blank amazement with which the men heard the declaration.

A moment's significant silence followed the announcement, but at length one of the men found voice to exclaim:

"You can't play that on us, old man!"

"The play has not commenced yet, you scoundrels!"

It was a critical moment. Once again death hung heavy in the air.

Black Raven was a fighter. It was nothing for him to be pitted against three men. The latter knew well enough that although they might down Raven, the chances were that two of them, and even all of them, would go down also. The alternative was presented of *making martyrs of themselves*.

There was no show for them to down their man and get away, especially since the terrible man was coolly prepared for them, and ready for the scrimmage to commence.

"Come, gentlemen," said the detective, coolly, "you heard what I said."

The truth crept chillingly over them that they had run into a trap; it would have been just lovely to have met Black Raven when they had a dead beat on him, but this face-to-face, muzzle-to-muzzle business was another sort of meeting altogether; it meant fight—a fight where the odds of three to one did not count.

"We throw up, Raven!" said one of the men.

"Not much!"

"We will withdraw."

"All right."

"We've made a mistake."

"I didn't ask you here."

"What has occurred?" asked M. Aumal.

"The men came here to murder you; they mistook me for you. They have gone."

"This is terrible!"

"It proves our peril. No time is to be lost. Were I alone, I would await developments. Your daughter is here, and we have no time to spare."

"And did they seek my child?"

"Yes."

"Ah! I begin to understand it all!"

"You know the instigator of the outrage?"

"I have reason to believe that I do."

"Then you recognize the peril?"

"I do."

"Will you trust your child to me?"

"I will."

"And what will you do?"

"I will take care of myself."

The few French servants of M. Aumal came running into the room. The master of the house addressed them in French, and at the same moment Alvia, the lovely French girl, with a countenance like death, came stealing down the stairs.

"Oh, papa! what has happened?"

The father answered her in his native language.

The lovely girl exhibited the most decided signs of terror, but in English she answered:

"What wou'd you have me do?"

"Go with Monsieur Raven."

"Is it your command?"

"It is."

With an angelic look of courage and resignation upon her face, the beautiful girl came to the detective, and thrilled his heart through and through with the declaration:

"I trust more than my life to you, noble man, and even my father's command would not lead me to trust another!"

A glance that was almost god-like, gleamed in the detective's eyes as he exclaimed:

"With me you will be safe—come!"

The detective bid the fair French girl robe herself for a long journey.

Alvia left the room, and in a few moments returned.

The detective had improved the interval in giving instructions to M. Aumal, but to all the Frenchman had merely replied:

"I will take care of myself! You save my child, and you shall receive a rich reward!"

Black Raven observed something peculiar in the actions of Aumal, but did not have time to inquire as to their significance.

When Alvia rejoined them, he said, "Come!" and reached out his strong hand toward her; but the girl ran to her father and threw herself into his arms.

A moment the parent embraced his child, and then placing her from him, said:

"Got there is no time to spare! I see your conductor grows impatient."

At this moment the blood of all present ran cold with horror, as a shrill, piercing shriek rang through the house.

It was a female voice.

All showed signs of alarm, but M. Aumal betrayed the most singular agitation.

"Gol gol!" he almost screamed.

Alvia ran back toward her father, and asked:

"Papa, did you hear that scream?"

"Got gol child!"

"Papa, it was a woman's voice!"

"One of the servants! Got gol!"

Again there came a fresh cause of excitement; wild yells and shouts were heard without. Black Raven stepped to the window and glanced out across the lawn. There appeared the halo of many lights. Too well the detective understood the meaning of the fitful gleam; the gang of ruffians were approaching the doomed house armed with torches.

Again he approached Alvia, and said:

"Come!"

Again that wild, weird, shrill shriek reverberated through the house, and without a word M. Aumal dashed from the room.

Black Raven caught the girl in his arms and started for the rear door.

The house was a double building, and a wide hall ran from front to rear, and it was toward the rear door that the detective started. He passed the door with his burden, when the front one was broken in, and with yells and

black Raven dashed on with his burden, but had proceeded but a few paces when he was confronted by half a dozen men, all armed and with vengeance and ferocity flushing from their wild eyes.

Our hero was still disguised as M. Aumal. A moment he released his hold upon the girl, in order to prepare for an aim, when with a shriek she dashed from him.

Black Raven would have pursued her, but the opportunity was not afforded him. He was compelled to engage in a struggle for his life!

Amidst the blazing torches, Black Raven sprung around like an infuriated demon! Bang! bang! flashed his revolvers, and in the violence of his exercise his gray wig came off, and the close-cropped head of a younger man was disclosed.

"Black Raven!" arose the cry, and the men scattered as from before an avalanche.

The detective cut his way through the few who dared remain to oppose him, and as he turned he saw the form of Alvia rushing through the hallway of the house, toward her doom.

The detective, despite the terrible odds, made an attempt to follow, but a dozen men came dashing through the open door toward him, and the next moment a lurid flame shot toward the heavens.

Black Raven became frantic. He appeared to bear a charmed life; bullets riddled his clothing; but he escaped unscathed in body, but his way was barred. He could not gain the house despite his luck; he was but human, and his strength was failing him.

Meantime the flames gained wonderful headway; the demons had done their work well; the house was a frame building, and had been fired in a dozen different places.

Black Raven could do nothing more; at any moment he was liable to go down, and he retreated to cover. Had it been any other man, he must have fallen; but it appeared as though every hand trembled as a "bead" was drawn on him.

Back from the house was a hedge which the detective reached, and over which he bounded when he turned.

He had a cover, and his good weapons began talk; the men scattered, and ran to get beyond the range of his deadly aim.

A moment, and the building was one mass of flames, and all the surrounding lawns were brightly illuminated.

There were a hundred men around the building, and yet none dared approach the fatal hedge; indeed, between the burning house and the hedge there already lay three dead men in their ghastliness, bearing testimony to the sure and fatal aim and iron nerve of the detective.

A strange fascination held Black Raven to the spot. His own safety demanded that he should flee, and yet he lingered in cover.

A moment, and he muttered:

"None of them escaped from the house, and poor Alvia only rushed back that her former peaceful home should become her funeral pyre!"

One fact greatly mystified the detective. He heard no dying shrieks of agony. He was assured that M. Aumal and his family and servants were all being devoured by the mad flames, and yet not a sound broke the stillness in the immediate vicinity of the burning building, save the roar of the flames and the falling beams.

There was no need for the detective to remain; no mortal could have remained in that house and have lived. He could do no good, and his own personal safety demanded his attention.

The horror was, however, not yet over, as from the flames later on there came face to face with our hero the figure of a beautiful apparition.

heard a conversation between the Frenchman and his child. They had not known of his presence, but from the facts stated in their talk he learned that Alvia had been pursued by a suitor whom she despised. The man had represented himself as a Spanish nobleman. The girl had not discerned the fact which had become patent to the detective: Andra Sarto and the Spanish nobleman were one and the same!

The detective, in his own quiet way, had been studying up the facts, without letting either M. Aumal or his daughter know that he had any knowledge of or interest in the matter; but he had reached the conclusion prior to the moment of Sarto's reencounter with Alvia.

Black Raven started to go away from the scene of the conflagration. It was a singular fact that he was permitted to entertain an idea of walking coolly away. Those howling fiends had been looking for him for weeks; they had thrown out skirmish parties in every direction; they had boasted what they would do when they found him; and yet, although they were nearly three-score in numbers and knew the exact locality where Black Raven lay concealed, not a man of them dared approach the spot.

The building was almost consumed; the walls had fallen in one after another, and the illumination became less brilliant as the flames decreased.

The gang, meantime, had held a consultation, as stated, and had decided upon their plans. The men were what is termed, in military parlance, deployed so as to literally surround the spot where the detective was supposed to be hiding.

The purpose was to environ the terror until daylight should appear, when, at long range, they could peek away at him with their rifles and thus avoid the risk of a hand-to-hand conflict.

A mysterious man had been present at the consultation of the leaders; the fellow was masked but appeared to be well known; the latter said:

"We have got him this time, sure; he can not escape!"

One of the men said:

"Andy, you have often boasted that you would like to meet Black Raven face to face."

"So I would!" came the answer from the masked man.

"You have kept well out of the way this night."

"I had reasons."

"Would you still like to meet Black Raven?"

"Yes."

"You can do so; you will not have to look for him."

"I expect to meet him."

"When?"

"Under the blaze of to-morrow's sun, but not under cover of the darkness."

"Well, he's a bad man to meet by day or night."

The masked man had been the one who arranged for the deployment of the men, and just at the moment that our hero determined to steal away, the gang scattered to take up their positions and hedge him in until morning.

Meantime Black Raven started to move off to his mountain retreat, a secret fortification where he could maintain himself against a thousand of his foes.

He struck the cover of a hedge, and so moved slowly and cautiously along, but had proceeded less than five hundred yards, when he was brought to a halt. He heard voices ahead of him, heard his own name mentioned, heard a man remark:

"It will be my good fortune to run drunk afoul of Black Raven yet! I tell you, boys, I feel it my mission to wipe that man out!"

The detective did not recognize the man's voice. It was not Sarto, and our hero was aware that over fifty men had boasted that they had a special mission to wipe him out.

Black Raven's face assumed a peculiar look, and his usually stern countenance was wreathed in a complacent smile, as he suddenly leaped forward, pistols in hand, exclaiming:

"Curse a motley gang of men bearing torches burst into the hall."

CHAPTER X.

BLACK RAVEN had every reason to know that Andy the Mex had been the instigator of the outrage.

Black Raven, upon one occasion, had over-

"Old man, Black Raven is here!"

A grand scatter followed. The man who had boasted a special mission to down the detective, acted after the manner of the old time militia captain, who told his men to blaze away at the enemy as long as their ammunition lasted, and then "git," and as he was a little lame he'd start at once!

The man with the special mission was the first to yell. "Oh, jiminy!" and he got—got away just about as fast as a long pair of legs would let him.

The detective had been able to locate the character of the particular group before he sprung into their midst; it was not a very daringfeat for an old ranger like himself to perform. He had expected them to scatter, and they did.

Black Raven continued on his way, and proceeded without further molestation; the mooners whom he had met were ashamed to admit that they had seen the scourge.

Our hero traveled along and had covered fully a mile, when he came to a halt. He heard a sound warning him of the approach of some one.

The detective was not a man who delighted in bloodshed, and only when actually forced, would he engage in a fight. He saw a fallen tree not far distant, and he ran toward it, dropped down, and waited. A moment passed, and he saw a sight that fairly made his hair stand on end.

It was a clear, starlight night, not a breath of air disturbed the quiet or caused a leaf to rustle, but the low murmur of a mountain stream made pleasant music.

The detective was on the outlook for the party whose step he had heard, when suddenly there appeared, within a few feet of him, a white apparition.

The ghost-like figure appeared as though it had come floating through the air on wings celestial.

Black Raven sat, pistol in hand, expecting to behold a mortal foe, when this uncanny visitor burst upon his view; the man was spell-bound for once in his life; he lost all nerve and power, and became physically as helpless as a child.

The figure's face was covered by a white, shining veil, but as our hero's eyes fell upon her form, the veil was drawn aside and the beautiful and angelic face of Alvia Aumal was revealed!

Black Raven would have spoken, but his tongue cleaved to the roof of his mouth. He was stricken speechless, and indeed did he believe it an angelic beauty, for the conviction was forced upon his mind, despite all his previous skepticism, that he was gazing upon the face of the dead.

Black Raven rose to his feet, rubbed his eyes, and glanced around in every direction, but not a sign could he descry of the appearance.

"Well, that does get me!" he muttered; "and what does it mean? Haun me, if I ever believed in ghosts, but I'll swear the balance of my life that I have seen just one, and that one the very belle of apparitions!"

A moment the detective was thoughtful; not for an instant did the possibility present itself to his mind that he had beheld a living, breathing soul. Had he not seen Alvia Aumal enter that building even after the fatal torch had been applied? Had he not stood by and seen the villa destroyed, leveled to the ground by the devouring flames? And well he knew no living soul could have remained there and come forth upon the subsidence of the flames, a mortal thing.

"This strange visitation means something," he muttered. "All my recollections of reading about ghostly visits record that these supernatural visitors only visit those whom they would have perform some act without the range of performance by a dweller beyond the grave."

Again the detective thought awhile, but soon once more exclaimed:

"I wish the lovely ghost had spoken, but as I live, I think I know what is expected of me. I am to avenge her—and I will!"

Black Raven once more resumed his journey. As stated, he took no means to track the strange apparition. It was his forte to track the living, not the dead.

It was well after midnight when the detective reached his castle—we call it a castle, and his place of refuge was well named.

Our hero had lived in the vicinity when a lad, and upon one occasion he had come to a crevice in the rocks at the time he was seeking shelter from a storm. As he crowded further and further into the crevice, he was astonished to

discover that he was proceeding along a rock passage.

It was near nightfall, and he did not dare press on any further that night; but upon the following day he had returned to the place, and had continued his explorations, and the results were most wonderful. After pressing along through the passage for a long distance, he came to a rock chamber. Having provided himself with a torch, he was enabled to make a most thorough examination. He was mousing around in the chamber when he came to a place where his foot sunk into a hole, and after an examination, boy-like, he commenced to burrow in the hole, and soon had an excavation large enough to admit his body to a lower passage. He was a brave lad, and down he went, and was soon pressing forward along a subterranean passage. At length he reached a place where there branched off a number of different passages. He had explored them all, and finally found one that ascended right up through the solid rock. He clambered up the latter until he found himself in a rock chamber right in the center of an immense crag, which he subsequently discovered towered high up above its fellows.

It was the coziest place he had ever been in during his whole life. There was an opening which served as a window, and through the latter he could look down on the adjacent ravine, or far over the surrounding country. It was one of the most wonderful chambers on earth.

In time, the detective discovered a second entrance to his wonderful refuge, and it was because of his secret that he had been enabled so long to baffle his enemies when upon his trail.

Upon the night in question the detective made his way to the entrance to his eyrie, and soon appeared at the opening to the cliff chamber.

A low growl greeted his appearance, but when Black Raven called out, "Ho! Panther! ho! Panther!" the growling ceased, and a moment later, when he entered the chamber, one of the strangest-looking animals that mortal eyes ever rested upon sprang toward him and wagged round him like a dog.

The animal was really a cross between a dog and the common American panther; the animal, when a pup, had been a present from an old Indian, and our hero had trained his singular cross until he had become a most invaluable dumb assistant.

In his rock chamber the detective had stored all the necessities for a long stay, even to the luxury of ice, which formed in the adjacent rock crevices, and was preserved throughout nearly the whole season. Similar ice caves can be found in almost all mountain ranges, and there are many of them in the Catskill and Shawangunk Mountains in New York State.

The detective had a bed of skins, a natural fire-grate, and many curious natural conveniences for housekeeping.

The latter incidents were very fortunate, as the brave man was often compelled to lay low for days, and sometimes even for weeks, in his cliff castle.

Black Raven was greatly fatigued when he reached his refuge. He had not had any sleep for two days and nights, and but very little to eat.

Upon his arrival he prepared a meal, and then lay down upon his bed of skins and slept in absolute security; and, under all the circumstances, it was indeed a blessed privilege.

Suddenly the detective awoke with a start. He was awakened by hearing a shrill scream like one in mortal agony or terror.

Daylight was just breaking; it was not clear day, but as he looked round, the gray light of the opening dawn shone into his rock chamber.

The detective remembered that he had heard a wild, shrill scream, and was about rising from his bed of skins, when the consciousness flashed over him that he had been dreaming. He was about settling back on his bed of skins, when he observed that his dog was acting very strangely. Black Raven watched the intelligent, but peculiar animal.

The half panther and half hound leaped to the rock window, and stuck his head out as though sniffing for a scent.

"Hang it!" muttered Black Raven, "what does it all mean?"

The detective had constructed a door which led from his rock chamber into the crevice passage. He opened the door to give the hound a chance to go out, but the animal did not take advantage of the opportunity.

"Well, old boy, I reckon it don't amount to much, if you do not wish to follow the trail, and I'll finish my nap."

The detective once more stretched himself out on his bed of skins; but he could not go to sleep, the actions of the dog were so peculiar. The animal did not settle down with his master, but showed considerable restlessness.

"Hang you, Panther, I wish you would settle down or show up. I don't understand you at all!"

Suddenly the detective leaped to his feet with a bound, like a Comanche Indian pierced with a hunter's bullet.

A second time he had heard the shrill, wild, wailing scream; the second time he was awake and in full possession of all his senses. He had not been dreaming, but had really heard the scream, and the cry came from between human lips.

The dog set up a low moan, and in many ways betrayed considerable excitement.

The detective sprung to the rock opening, but could see nothing.

"Well, this does get me!" he muttered. "I reckon Panther and I had better go down and investigate."

Black Raven motioned to his dog, and passed from his refuge.

Down through the singular passages, torch in hand, he made his way, and soon appeared in the ravine over which his cliff chamber hung.

The dog was started to find a trail, and the animal set vigorously to work, but appeared to be baffled at every turn.

Meantime, the sun began to gild with his red light the surrounding peaks.

The detective at length came to the conclusion that it was a matter that did not interest him, when his animal uttered a low bark, which was a warning signal.

CHAPTER XI.

"Hello! now we strike something!" was the exclamation that fell from the lips of the detective.

The animal began to circle round, with his nose to the ground. His actions indicated that he had struck a trail.

Round and round he circled, until suddenly he uttered a quick, indicative yelp, and started off and the detective followed.

The animal ran along with his nose to the ground for several hundred yards, when he came to a halt, and stood over some object.

Black Raven hastened forward and soon reached the spot, when he beheld an index that greatly excited his curiosity.

There had been a heavy rain a few hours previously, and a great body of water rushing down the adjacent declivity had formed a little rise of soft sand loam, and imprinted upon the little bar was the distinct mark of a human foot.

The imprint was made by the small slippers of a female. Of the latter fact there was no question. It was a delicately outlined mark, and of comparatively tiny proportions.

The place where the sand-trace was found was not an ordinary route of travel, at least for delicate and unguarded females.

"Come, Panther, old boy," signaled Black Raven, "we will follow this up; you have indeed struck an off trail!"

Having received encouragement the dog leaned forward to follow the trail, and succeeded in holding the scent for an hour, but suddenly it was lost altogether.

The detective spent considerable time with his hound seeking to recover the trail, but did not succeed, and at length he reluctantly returned toward the cliff castle.

As our hero walked along, strange and thrilling suspicions began to float through his mind.

"By gosh!" he exclaimed, "can it be possible that I was fooled last night when I thought I had seen a ghost? Can it be possible that my eyes really rested upon the lovely face of the living Alvia Aumal?"

Black Raven gave the matter a great deal of thought, and determined to investigate the mystery; meantime, he had other business on hand.

The day following was election day in a neighboring village for local officers, and our hero determined to go down to town to learn some facts.

He knew the occasion would bring together the workmen from many of the mills. He knew that the men would get on a grand rampage, and while under the influence of liquor would grow talkative and boastful, and give many useful facts away.

Our hero was on the lookout for facts; there was one particular still he had marked for a

raid, as, among the gang who ran it, he suspected the presence of two men for whom he had special warrants, and he had given a good deal of time to the search for these same outlaws.

In his castle chamber the detective kept all his paraphernalia for working his extraordinary disguises, and upon returning to his eyrie he set to work to prepare himself for a visit to the village.

There was a gay time in the village; the election had been held in the village school-house, and the victors were celebrating their victory.

There is usually but one place and manner for such celebrations; a good sized collection of rioters were gathered at the village tavern.

The men were having a boisterous time, when a respectable-looking man, resembling either a parson or some school-teacher, rode up to the tavern.

The keeper of the tavern was a German, a fat jolly fellow, who could not boast of much principle or honesty, but he was too cunning to get mixed up in any unlawful undertakings.

It was a gala day for him. He was taking in the "shucks" at a rapid rate, and, as he said to one of the revelers, he "felt slush bully."

The Dutchman was sitting upon the piazza when the parson-like looking traveler rode up and dismounted.

The old darky came over from the stables and led a fine horse away.

The sleek looking pedagogue entered the tavern, and, when followed by the proprietor, demanded a meal.

"By Jimminiet!" exclaimed mine host, "I ges it vos a pad day for a square meal in mine house! I had a large company to-day, mine friend!"

"A light meal will do me," returned the pedagogue, who owned a shrill, piping voice, and who was altogether as effeminate and sickly looking a "cuss" as ever dismounted at a wayside inn.

"I ves do der best I vos able mit you."

"I will not complain, my friend; I've had a long ride, and I'm not in a dainty mood—anything will do me."

The group of men sitting and standing round were interested listeners to the conversation between the school-teacher and the owner of the tavern.

There was some lively fun to follow the advent of the man with the piping voice.

The traveler went in and had his meal, and shortly afterward appeared upon the piazza. He had just thrown himself into a chair when one of the men called out:

"Parson, that's a fine horse you ride!"

The seeming parson made no answer, but commenced to laugh in the most silly manner.

The men looked into one another's face, and their glances conveyed the inquiry:

"What sort of chap is this galoot, anyhow?"

The man repeated his remark:

"I'm saying, parson, that is a fine horse you ride!"

The parson again commenced to laugh in his peculiar and silly manner.

The men once more glanced into one another's faces; their looks sent forth the inquiry, "What sort of a 'cuss' has come among us, anyhow?"

"Are you laughing because I addressed you as parson?" inquired the man.

"Yes."

"Don't you like to be addressed as parson?"

"Yes."

"Why did you laugh, then?"

"I'm not a parson, and yet everywhere I go every one appears to take me for a parson; I can't tell why."

"You are not a parson?"

"No."

"Mebbe you're a school-teacher?"

The man laughed again.

"Ain't you a school-teacher?"

"No, sir."

"What may your profession and calling be, my friend?"

"Suppose you guess."

"I'm not a Yankee."

"I thought you were."

"What put that idea into your head?"

"Because you were a-guessing."

"What was I guessing? I never guessed in my life!"

"I'll have to bet you a 'tenner,' old man, you've been guessing ever since you've been talking to me."

"How?"

"You guessed I was a parson; and then you guessed I was a school-teacher; and when I ask

you to guess again, you get on your ear and tell me you are no Yankee!"

"We won't quarrel, stranger, but I would like to know what your profession may be."

"Well, I'm not ashamed of my profession; I'm a circus man."

"A circus man?" came the ejaculation.

"What are you doing up this way, stranger?"

"None of your business!" came the direct answer.

There was a fair chance for a quarrel, but another of the gang averted an immediate outbreak by asking:

"Did you pick up that horse around here, strange?"

"No."

"Is he for sale?"

"Well, not exactly, but I'm always ready for a good trade. I'll trade off anything, even my voice, for a better one, or a poorer one, if I get difference enough."

"I'm looking for a horse like the one you own."

"Well, we may strike in for a trade. I'm open, but you will just give me a chance to gather myself, will you, I've had a long ride."

At this moment further conversation was interrupted by the arrival of a second horseman.

The new-comer was Andy the Mex.

The man was a swaggeer, and as he dismounted and stepped upon the tavern stoop, he called out:

"Come, boys, let's all have a drink."

The men followed into the bar-room, all hands save the circus man; the latter kept his seat.

Andy the Mex had glanced at the parson-looking fellow as he passed into the bar-room, and suspicion crossed his mind.

Once in the bar-room Andy the Mex demanded, in his usually imperious manner:

"Who is that fellow out there?"

"A circus man," came the reply.

"I don't like his looks."

"He's a 'stunner'!"

"He is, eh?"

"Yes."

"Did it ever come across the minds of you fellows that it would be a good idea just about these times to go close in on all strangers?"

"That's just what Ike's been doing," said one of the men.

"Let's have that man in to take a drink and we'll sound him."

Andy the Mex stepped to the door and called:

"Come, stranger, my invitation was for all hands."

The circus man entered the bar-room and coolly took a drink, though he was aware that every movement he made was closely watched.

One of the men had told Andy the Mex of the fine horse owned by the stranger, and the chief among the mooners said:

"I understand you are a circus man?"

"Yes."

"They tell me you own a fine horse?"

"Well, mine is a pretty good animal."

"Is he for sale?"

"No."

"A present, possibly?"

"Well, he may be, I won't say he ain't."

"Who is he for?"

"I am looking for some nice man to give him to—some man who will appreciate a good horse."

"We have a man around here who is in need of a good horse."

The man laughed—laughed in that peculiar manner which had so riled Ike Craft.

"Where are you to meet Black Raven?"

Andy the Mex made the latter declaration in a very significant tone, and keenly watched the effect of his words.

If he anticipated seeing the circus man wince, he was disappointed, as the stranger answered with the utmost coolness:

"Well, if Black Raven is up this way,

you've a good man among you."

"Then you admit that the horse you ride is for Black Raven?"

"I am not admitting anything."

It was a fact that Black Raven's horse had been shot under him only the week previous, upon which occasion the famous detective had met with a very narrow escape.

"I'd like to see your horse," said Andy the Mex.

"There is no reason why you should not see him."

The man adjourned to the piazza and the horse was ordered up. Meantime, Andy the

Mex had commanded his own horse to be brought round.

The two animals were looked over, and their various points were discussed by men who understood the good and bad "points" in a horse very well.

After a bit, Andy the Mex said:

"So you admit your horse is for Black Raven?"

"I have admitted nothing of the kind!"

"I say you did."

Andy the Mex spoke in his accustomed overbearing manner.

"You assert that I said my horse was a present for Harry Raven?"

"Yes."

The circus man spoke very slowly and calmly as he retorted:

"You compel me to say you lie!"

A sudden calm fell upon every lip.

Andy the Mex was taken all aback.

"Look here, stranger, you are a bold talker."

"Am I?"

"Yes."

"That is what I was thinking about you; it takes a bold man to tell another such a thing to his face."

The men standing around were surprised that Andy the Mex did not pull. He was known as a quick shooter, but somehow he did not respond at the moment.

"I like your horse, stranger."

"All men that know a horse must like him; he's a good animal."

"I'll trade with you."

"How will you trade?"

"Your horse for mine."

"You're mad, man."

"I've a proposition to make."

"Let's have your proposition."

CHAPTER XII.

"Do you ever gamble?"

"Sometimes."

"I'll put up my horse against yours, and play you euchre; the best three games out of five."

"That suits me!"

"Will it be a square game?" demanded Andy.

"We'll name a referee, and the man who is caught gouging in any way forfeits the game."

A great deal of suppressed excitement was visible as the men walked into the tavern to engage in the strange game.

The table and cards were produced, and the players sat down face to face. Andy the Mex won the first deal and shuffled the cards.

"Pass," said the circus man.

Andy the Mex raised the trump and made a straight "march."

The circus man took his deal and was "ordered up."

A second time Andy the Mex made "two points," and following with his "deal," "took up the trump," and made his point, which gave him the first game.

The second game was won by the circus man, and the third by Andy the Mex, and the fourth by the circus man.

The games stood "two and two," with the deal in favor of Andy the Mex, for the last and winning game.

During the whole progress of the play, not a word had been exchanged outside the usual conversation strictly pertinent to the game.

Andy the Mex "dealt" the cards for the last game, and made one "point" only.

The circus man followed with his deal and made a "march," which gave him the best call in the game.

Andy the Mex dealt again and made only one point.

The chances were dead against him.

The man grew deathly pale, and exhibited considerable nervousness and excitement.

The loss of a horse was not much. He was making money fast enough to stand the loss of several horses at a sitting, but his prestige was at stake.

The circus man followed with his deal, and when Andy the Mex passed, raised the trump.

The crisis had arrived.

Andy the Mex threw his cards upon the table, and exclaimed:

"Four!"

The circus man was cool as a cucumber, and held his hand covered while he coolly examined the discarded "hand" of Andy the Mex.

"I've won your horse," he said.

"Not by a foul!"
"I appeal to the referee."

The latter said:

"As far as I can see, all was fair and square."

"Do you so decide?" asked the circus man.

"I must so decide."

"Then I've won."

The circus man laid down his cards, showing five trumps. If the "hand" had been played he would have made a march, which would have been sufficient to win the game.

"The horse is mine," said the circus man; "I've won it fair and square."

The circus man rose from his seat and walked to the door and whistled to the old colored hostler.

"Bring out that bay horse!" he called.

The detective's was an iron-gray.

"De bay horse, sah?"

Yes."

The negro led out the bay horse.

In silence all the men had stolen out to the stable-yard. Andy the Mex was among the number.

The latter stood pale as a ghost.

It was a terrible moment; there was no question but that the sleek-looking circus man was game, and intended to make good his word.

Andy the Mex felt that his opportunity had come. Turning to the men gathered about, he said:

"Boys, I've recognized that man from the start. He's a friend of Black Raven's; are you going to let him get away?"

The men made no demonstration.

Addressing the landlord, the circus man said: "Old man, I shall hold you responsible for the iron-gray. I shall ride the bay."

The circus man had just uttered the words, when Andy the Mex exclaimed:

"Never!"

There came a flash and report.

The fusillade had commenced.

The circus man was cool as ice as he drew his shooter and prepared to shoot.

An interruption came; the referee sprung forward, and knocked the weapon from the hand of Andy the Mex as the man was about to fire his second shot.

The whole scene transpired within a few moments.

The man who had acted as referee, exclaimed:

"This can't go on! I am involved! I decide that the stranger won the horse fair and square, and if it comes to shooting over my decision, I've got to take a hand in the racket!"

Andy the Mex had made a demonstration, and he was satisfied, even glad, to get out of the scrape.

"You can have the horse," he called out. "I give it up, but I'll buy him back. What will you take in money for him?"

"One hundred and fifty!" came the answer.

The loser counted out the money, mounted the repurchased animal, and rode away.

The circus man walked back into the bar-room, and made glad the heart of the German landlord by buying large quantities of drink.

So the afternoon passed.

It was late in the afternoon when Black Raven mounted his horse to ride away.

He had made no secret as to his mission in the district. He said he had come over to look at a wonderful negro child, which he thought might be an attraction in the circus.

It was known that there was such a child in the mountains—quite a prodigy; and the detective's declaration was accepted and implicitly believed by all hands.

It was still some hours before sunset when the detective rode away. He had made up his mind to visit the scene of the previous night's outrage; the strange meeting with the beautiful ghost, and the hearing of the scream and tracing of the footprint, had made a great impression upon his mind.

"Ghosts," he kept repeating, "don't leave footmarks in the sand!"

The detective had ridden for about an hour, when he was brought to halt.

A little colored boy ran out from a clump of brush and beckoned to him to halt.

"Well, my little man, what do you want to say?"

"Dar hab been bad goin' on roun' heah, sah! Don't know when a man am gwine ter be laid out; and I jus' thought I'd lay roun' and warn whoocher might be comin' along de road."

"I don't understand you yet, sonny."

"Dar am some ob de riders down dar by de

creek, layin' low under de bridge. Dey am layin' for someone, shuh?"

"How long have they been there?"

"About an hour, sah; and I knows dat one ob de gang am a big teller. Gose am one ob de tellers who burned down de Frenchman's house."

"Ahl did you know Mr. Auman?"

"Doin' know the mooseeah very well; but I were well acquainted wid der beautiful young lady dat were his daughter, and I'se glad dat she wasn't in de house when it wer burned down."

"You are glad she was not in the house when it was burned down?"

"Yes, sah."

Black Raven was deeply interested.

"How do you know she was not in the house when it was burned down?"

"Der weren't nobody dar, and ef der weren't nobody dar den de gal weren't dar, dat's all dar 'bout it!"

"Come here, boy."

"No, sah."

"Why not?"

"Jiminy, yer ain't gwine ter hab a chance ter gib dis yere chile a cuff, and dat's all de satisfaction a nigger gits when he gibs good solid information to a white man!"

The detective tossed the boy a silver dollar, and asked:

"What is your name, my lad?"

"Golly, boss, ef dat am der kind ob cuffs yer am gibben out, I'se jes' glad ter take all yer got; my name am Chris Wonder, and I is a wonder: dis yere chile am de wonder ob der world, only de people don't know it, dat am all!"

"Where were you raised, Chris?"

"I wer raised down in Louisiana, sah."

"How does it happen you are up here in Georgia?"

"I cum heah."

"You did, eh?"

"Yes, sah."

"What led you to come here?"

"I'm a rover."

"What is your business, Chris?"

"I'se a circus! Golly, yes, sah! I'se a circus! I'se a whole show in myself; horses, clown, jumpers, and all! Yes, sah, I'se de whole show!"

The wonderful Black Raven was amazed; it was but a short time previously that he had represented himself as a circus man, and here, singularly enough, he had run across a curious little "dark" who represented himself as the "whole show."

Black Raven had often felt the necessity of some shrewd assistant, and here was an odd little genius who at sight appeared to fill the bill.

"Are you ready for business, Chris?"

"Yes, sah; I'se alius ready."

"Don't you want to give an entertainment?"

"Yes, sah."

"Well, pitch in, my lad!"

The little black wonder did give an entertainment; and Black Raven was greatly amazed.

The little dark was a ventriloquist and imitator, one of the most astonishing performers the detective had ever beheld.

"Chris, how would you like to enter my service?"

"Dunno, boss, as dat 'ar would pay any better."

"How long have you been knockin' around in the mountains?"

"'Bout two months, boss."

"Did you ever hear of Black Raven?"

"Golly! who ain't heerd ob Black Raven, de grea' teefive?"

"I'm Black Raven, boy."

The little dark did not turn pale, simply because nature had placed a bar to any such transformation in his case; but he looked scared. The mention of the name of the famous detective made the little fellow's blood run cold.

"You am Black Raven, boss?"

"Yes, I am Black Raven."

"Golly, boss, yer look like a person! And when yer asked me to enter yere service, I thought yer wanted dis yere chile to do de psalm-singing while yer did de preachin'!"

CHAPTER XIII.

BLACK RAVEN was highly amused at the little dark's rate display of wit and cunning.

The detective said:

"You will make your fortune if you go into

business with me; but I will tell you the truth, you may have to face danger occasionally."

"I'se alius been doin' dat yer, boss, dat ain't no consideration wid dis yere chile; and I'se jes' ready to go in partners wid yer."

"It's a bargain, Chris?"

"It am a bargain, sah! We won't mention der devide till we've done a little business, and see what kind ob houses we hab, eh?"

"That will all be satisfactory; and now how about the fellows that are lying down under the bridge?"

"Since I know who yer are, boss, I'se jes' gat an idee what dey am doin' down dar."

"What is your idea, Chris?"

"Dey am layin' for Black Raven, dat am shuh."

The conversation between our hero and little Chris had occupied fully half an hour, and the sun had gone down behind the mountain peaks, and the shadows of evening began to lengthen over cliff and crag.

"Glad I met yer, boss; dat ain't no use goin' down dat yere way now."

"I am going to cross that bridge, Chris."

"Golly, boss, but dat am ober a dozen ob dem yere mooners down dar!"

"My course lays over that bridge."

"Couldn't yer make it convenient ter go out ob yer way, boss?"

"Not to-night."

"Golly, but yer must hab tickler business down dar. Dem yere men mean business, dat am shuh."

"You say there are about a dozen."

"Yes, sah."

"Well, boy, you go round the bridge, and wait for me up by the little stone house."

"How am I gwine to get dar and not go ober der bridge?"

"You can swim?"

"Like an eel."

"That's how you will get there."

"I'll go ober dar, boss; yes, I'll go dar; but, golly! yer am takin' awful chances. Yes, yer am; dat ain't no use talkin', yer am takin' awful chances."

"That's an old game with me, Chris; but you go ahead and lay low for me. I'll be there before yonder sun shows up on the other side of the peak at the beginning of another day."

After the little dark Chris had disappeared, our hero faced his horse around, and rode in a contrary direction from the bridge.

He did not ride far, however, before he came to a large field, where quite a goodish horse was grazing. Black Raven let down the bars, and led his own horse into the field, and had little difficulty in catching the other horse. He had previously removed the trappings from the iron-gray, and now transferred them to the horse he had captured.

The detective rode away, and headed toward the bridge where the assassins were lying in wait for him.

Black Raven did not, as stated, feel as confident as he would make it appear. He knew Andy the Mex to be a desperate, dare-devil fellow, and one of the shrewdest rogues who ever infested a peaceful community.

The day had passed, and the long twilight was just setting into the blackness of the night, when the solitary horseman rode upon the bridge.

The rider was mounted on a bay horse, and he was dressed as an ordinary every-day working farmer.

"Halt!" came the command, and four masked men blocked the passage just as the horse stepped upon the earth across the bridge.

The rider halted his horse when the second command came:

"Dis-mount!"

"One moment, gentleman! Why should I dismount? What does this mean?"

At this moment another masked man joined the party.

The detective glanced at the new-comer, and studying the outlines of his figure in the gathering darkness, recognized him as Andy the Mex.

The latter came forward and examined the rider's steed, and, in a muttering tone, said:

"Hang it! the man we were waiting for has not come!"

Addressing the rider, Andy the Mex said:

"From which quarter do you come, my friend?"

"I don't know as it is any one's business but my own."

"I asked you a question."

"Did you?"

"I did."

"Well, you have your answer."

"You are a bold man."

"Am I?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"We may drop you from your horse and toss your body into the stream."

The rider laughed.

"Shall we down him, cap?" came the question from one of the men.

The rider pronounced the letter W.

The men began to look into one another's faces, but one of them said:

"I."

"Double S," came the response from the rider.

"K," said the man who pronounced the letter I.

"Double E," came the response.

"Y," pronounced the man.

"Double Y," came the correction.

The men dropped from their haughty attitude, and one of them remarked:

"It spells whisky according to our dictionary."

"I reckon I do, boys; I'm a 'dead still,' a worm devil, and clear of the brand!"

"Hello, pard, who are you?"

The rider laughed, and said:

"My name is Breton; I'm from Kentucky, and a solitary 'wolf'."

Every word spoken by the detective carried a deep significance; indeed, he had given the proper passwords, and had run on in his general talk, showing him to be one of the gang, seemingly.

Breton was a well-known name; a fellow of the same name was a notorious outlaw. His appellation of a "lone wolf" indicated that a price was on his head—that he was a fugitive.

"Which quarter did you ride from, comrade?"

"I came through the village."

"Did you meet any travelers on the road?"

"Yes."

"A man on an iron-gray?"

"No."

"What sort of a traveler did you meet?"

"A darky."

"No one else?"

"No one else; but tell me, were you looking for some one?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"A person-looking chap."

"There has been a give away."

"Eh?" ejaculated the men in chorus.

"There has been a give away."

"What are you telling us?"

"I received a warning."

"You received a warning?"

"Yes."

"Who from?"

"A darky."

The men looked into one another's faces.

"Yes," continued the disguised detective, "as I rode along toward this bridge, I was hailed on the road, and a dark said to me, 'Don't ride down over der bridge, boss; I asked why not, and the answer came, 'Dat am an ambuscade down dar?'"

Curses rose from the lips of the men, when Black Raven continued:

"If your game rode ahead of me he was warned; if he comes after me he will be warned."

Andy the Mex gave the command to two of his men.

"Ride up the road, boys, and if you come across a dark down him."

The men were about to proceed when Black Raven called:

"Halt!"

CHAPTER XIV.

WHEN the detective called "halt!" Andy the Mex demanded:

"Why do you countermand my orders?

Who are you?"

The fellow was, as we have indicated, an overbearing, disagreeable, bullying sort of a man.

"There is no need to down the negro if they find him."

"No need to down him?"

"I tell you it's bad policy for us to down a man when there's no need; especially a poor negro. Now, I'll tell you the dark who warned me by chance happened to discover that you fellows were lying down here under the bridge,

and as he walked along he innocently warned every unwary traveler to have a care. It ain't good policy to be stirring up opposition all the time by the unnecessary dropping out of poor innocent men. We've enough dropping to do in a legitimate way."

The men all expressed their coincidence with Breton.

Andy the Mex said:

"Our man may come yet."

The men, however, appeared to think that there was no use wasting further time.

There was to be a meeting that night, and it was a long ride to the rendezvous.

Some of the men had families, and were not going to the rendezvous that night; others were going, and the men separated, despite the protests of Andy the Mex.

A few moments later, and the latter with our hero, remained alone by the bridge.

Black Raven purposely kept Sarto engaged in conversation, while the others rode away. When the balance of the gang were well beyond sight and hearing, the detective suddenly demanded:

"Who were you waiting for here at the bridge?"

"A chap we met up in the village this afternoon who claims to be a circus man, but who, I think, is a fraud."

"Who do you think he is?"

"Between you and me, the fellow was a confederate of Black Raven!"

"You think the circus man was a friend of Black Raven?"

"Yes, I do."

"What sort of a looking chap was the circus man?"

Andy the Mex accurately described the detective as he appeared when in the village.

"Hang it, old man, you've lost your opportunity!"

"What do you mean?"

"The circus man was Black Raven."

Andy the Mex started back in surprise.

"The circus man was Black Raven?"

"Yes."

"But how do you know?"

"Shall I tell you?"

"Yes."

"What would you have done if you had known the circus man was Black Raven?"

"I'd have 'downed' him; had a good chance; but it was not Raven!"

"You would have downed him?"

"I would."

"It was Raven!"

"Once again, How do you know?"

"I am Black Raven!"

Our hero dismounted as he made the startling declaration.

Andy the Mex started back, his eyes rolled, and his face turned pale—turned so pale that its pallor was revealed even under the starlight.

"You are Black Raven?"

"I am Black Raven!"

"Bah! you can not come that little fable over me!"

"Old man, I owe you an explanation; you just told me that Black Raven kept clear of you; now I tell you that you have made a mistake; but against all your ideas on that subject comes the fact that I am not clear of you to-night; I've sought you!"

"Why have you sought me?"

"I've a little score to settle with you, Sarto; in the first place, you've been running around boasting that Raven kept out of your way; that you wanted to meet him; that you would down him when you did, and now I'm here to give you a chance!"

Andy the Mex saw that he was cornered; the man was a desperate fighter, but when it came to standing face to face with a man like Black Raven, some of the fight was taken out of him; indeed, his blood ran chilled through his veins.

But one alternative remained. He must fight. He knew it would be useless to plead, and equally useless to attempt to run away.

His hand sought the butt of one of his pis-

tols, when Black Raven demanded:

"Will you have it that style, old man?"

The detective also placed one hand on his weapon.

"Let's have it fair and square!" said Sarto.

"How shall it be?"

"It shall be a square stand-up fight!"

While the men stood there, both with pale faces and gleaming eyes, darkness came over the face of the earth, the stars were hidden from view, a brilliant electric flash shot athwart the darkened heavens, and a loud peal of thunder burst upon the ears of the two men and went reverberating across the mountain peaks.

The roll of the thunder and the flashes of lightning heightened the tragic effect of the tableau presented upon the bridge, as the two men stood there.

"Come, old man, we'll have it without further argument," said Black Raven.

The "moner" was aroused; his blood ran warm at last. Why should he fear Black Raven? Had he not come out the best man in a dozen fights? He sprung toward the detective, and the combat was begun.

Our hero raised the man, and with one toss sent him over the rail of the bridge, down, down, to the dark waters; and as the splash fell upon his ear, a lightning flash revealed the white foam that momentarily brightened the waters.

All this time the detective's horse had stood, adding to the dramatic interest of the scene, trembling and snorting with terror as each successive peal of rumbling thunder burst overhead.

The detective at the time he had dismounted had thrown the bride over a bridge post, and releasing the frantic animal, he leaped upon his back and rode away in the black night.

The frightened animal dashed forward at a furious rate.

About a mile from the bridge the detective came to the place he had appointed for the little "What Is It?" to wait for him.

The storm was breaking away as the detective came to a halt and peered over his horse's head, looking for his new partner.

"I reckon the little abnormal has skipped away," muttered our hero, when he was saluted with the remark:

"Am dat de name yer are gibben dis yere chile?"

"Is that you, Chris?"

"Dat am me, boss, suah!"

"Hop up here in front of me, I must go back over the bridge."

"Why yer gwine ober der bridge agin, boss?"

"I left the lion gray on the other side."

"Hello, dar, yer hab got annudder hose, eh?"

The storm had cleared away, the stars came forth once more, when the little "What Is It?" suddenly exclaimed:

"Hello, dar, who is it dis yer chile am talkin' to? I jes' ges dat it am all ober with Black Raven arter all."

At this moment the detective remembered that he had changed his appearance.

"Com, com, pard, we've no time to lose."

"Yer am Black Raven?"

"I am."

"All right."

As the little limb of blackness spoke, he made one leap like a cat, and was perched on the animal's neck. The horse made a spring forward, but was speedily brought down, faced around, and started for the paddock, from which he had been taken a couple of hours previously.

The detective rode back across the bridge at a mad gait, and soon reached the field where his iron-gray had been started loose.

Having secured his own steed, our hero led him out to the road and stood a moment, thinking over what he should do, when Chris said:

"Boss Raben, I've got somet'ing ter tell you."

"Out with your information, Chris!"

"Yer am layin' aroun' ter upset some ob dem stills what de gang am turnin'?"

"I am."

"I jes' know whar one ob dem am located."

"You do?"

"Yes, sash; and what am more, it's de 'pinion ob dis yere chile dat de mooners hab got two or free prisoners."

The detective was all attention at once. There had been several mysterious disappearances; two United States marshals were missing, good and true men who had been given over as dead, victims of the gang, murdered in cold blood; but when Chris spoke of two or three prisoners, the suspicion flushed through Black Raven's mind that possibly the prisoners were the missing men. He had all along intuited an idea that there was a possibility that the men were living, as he had been unable to unearth a single clue that pointed toward their deaths.

"You know the location, Chris?"

"Yes, sah."

"Can you lead me there?"

"Yes, sah."

"We'll mount and go there."

Chris mounted up ahead of the detective once more, and the iron gray's head was turned down the road. They were riding along, the tongue of the little darky being all the time rolling off quaint observations, when suddenly the horse began to show signs of restlessness, and after going forward a few steps with his ears pricked up, he came to a sudden halt and reared up on his hind legs, and then commenced to back, showing every sign of extreme terror.

"Golly, boss, what am de matter wid der gray?"

As Chris spoke he slid from his seat to the ground.

The little darky ran ahead of the horse toward the spot where the animal had first seen the object that had caused him to leap in the air.

A moment, and the lad ran back exclaiming:

"Golly, boss, it am dar!"

"What?"

"An angel or a ghost!"

Black Raven was off the horse in an instant, and, bidding the lad hold the gray, he ran forward.

The detective looked around in every direction, but could discover nothing. In a moment he returned, and asked:

"Where did you see it, Chris?"

"Right dar, sah!" and the little negro pointed toward a clump of bushes beside the road.

"What was it you saw?"

"What I tol' yer—an angel or a ghost!"

"Ghost of an old woman?"

"No, sah; but de ghost of a young gal. Dar ain't no mistake; I seed it, shuah!"

The detective started once more to look for the apparition. He tramped around in every direction, and at length drew his mask lantern, but not a sign could be discovered of the presence.

Once more he returned, and said:

"I re-kon you were deceived, Chris."

"No, sah; I seed it, shuah!"

"Did you recognize the face?"

"Didn't see de face. But bark, boss! hold on dar; what am dat?"

The little darky bent his head in a listening attitude.

"What now, boy?"

"Don't ver hear it?"

"Hear what?"

"Dar am horsemen comin' along de road, boss."

Black Raven listened, and, after a moment, could indistinctly hear a sound which he interpreted as the tread of horses; but it was a strange sound.

"Dey ain't far off, boss; dem yet horses' hoofs am miffl'd; it am a gang ob de riders!"

Black Raven so concluded, and there was not a moment to spare; seizing his horse by the bridle he led him off the road and took shelter behind a hedge.

A moment passed and a cavalcade of horsemen drove in sight; the riders passed by within twenty feet of where the detective, the horse, and the little "dark" stood, hidden behind the bushes.

The men were riding single, forming a square round two strange looking figures, evidently prisoners; who were in the center of the square of horsemen.

The prisoners were enveloped in black gowns, their heads and whole bodies being completely enveloped.

The scene told its own story; death was abroad that night. Judge Lynch evidently held court, and a murder trial had gone forth.

The detective's resolution was formed at once; the fact that the lynching party were a gang of riders went to show conclusively that the two condemned men were victims.

"Dey am goners, boss!" whispered Chris.

"Do you think so?"

"Shuah."

"We'll see about that, Chris!"

CHAPTER XV.

In a moment the detective had formed his plan. He issued certain instructions to Chris, and at the same instant picketed his horse.

Chris ran out into the road, and the next instant a wild, shrill shriek rose upon the midnight air.

The riders at the moment were not more than three hundred feet distant from the point where the detective had picketed his horse.

As the wild, shrill scream broke the stillness the horsemen were heard to come to a halt, and a moment later a solitary rider came galloping back to the spot where Chris stood in the road.

The man saw the outline of the little figure, and reining in his steed, called as he leveled his pistol:

"Did you just scream?"

"No, sah!"

"Did you hear a scream?"

"Yes, sah."

"Who screamed?"

"Dunno, sah."

"This is strange!" muttered the man.

The words had just fallen from the man's lips, when a most extraordinary incident occurred.

The rider was jerked from his horse and thrown upon his back, while the muzzle of a pistol was thrust between his teeth before he had a chance to make an outcry.

The unhorsed man lay as silent as though stricken dumb, until addressed,

"Make the least noise and you are a dead man!"

In a low tone the fellow said:

"You have made a mistake."

"No, no, Anderson, I know you!"

"My name is not Anderson!"

"You can't fool me, you're trailing after the boys."

"I'm one of 'em!"

"You're one of 'em?"

"Yes."

"W," said the detective.

"I," answered the man.

"Go on."

"Double S."

"Go on."

"K."

"G, on."

"Double E."

"Go on."

"Double Y," repeated the man.

"You spell right, but you're an interloper."

"Hang it! you're a fool!" muttered the man.

"What is your name?"

"Biffar."

"What's your number?"

"Thirteen."

"Thank you!" ejaculated Black Raven, but the detective spoke under his breath.

Our readers have probably already discerned the detective's game. His scheme was a cunning one. He had played it well and had won.

"Where are you from?"

"Elgin."

"What mill do you work?"

"The B. B."

Black Raven had all his points.

"Old man," he said, "you've saved your life!"

As the detective spoke he put an end to Biffar's power of speech by clapping an ingeniously constructed gag into his mouth.

Our hero always went prepared for biz.

Having gagged his man he tied him hands and feet with the assistance of Chris.

When the man was secure Raven raised him and carried him back from the road.

The detective's game was apparent. We omitted to state that before binding his man the detective had stripped him.

As the detective commenced to assume the man's clothes, Chris began to perceive the game.

"Yer am de debbil, shuah, but yer gwine ter hab yer tail cut, boss, et yer try dat yere game!"

The detective laughed in his usual manner, but made no reply.

"What am dis yere chile gwine ter do?"

"Fallow me!"

The detective walked out to the road and mounted the discomfited rider's steed.

"Can you lay close, Chris?"

"Yes, sah."

"All right; remember our signals!"

"I've dor."

While riding along, previous to the incidents we have narrated, the detective had improved the time by arranging a few signals with Chris.

Black Raven mounted the horse, and rode forward toward the spot where the gang of riders had halted.

The men had resumed their march, and the detective rode leisurely along after them. He had traversed about half a mile when he overtook them.

The night was pitch dark; clouds once more obscured even the light which had struggled down from the stars.

The men came to a halt as they saw their supposed companion riding after them.

"Hello, Biffar!"

"Hello!" came the response.

"What was it?"

The pretended Biffar rode down into their midst, and answered:

"I'll be hanged if I could make out!"

Black Raven was cool as an iced cobbler.

"Did you see any one?" came the question.

"Yes."

"Who?"

"A nigger."

"Woman?"

"No; a boy."

"Did the boy scream?"

"Can't tell."

"There is something strange about this!" remarked the man.

The party rode on, talking about the affair, and the condemned men, like a pair of ghosts, rode in the center.

The party approached the fatal bridge, and as they did so the figure of a man was seen standing there.

The riders drew their weapons to be ready; one man might mean a dozen, but on they rode, and a few moments later came to a halt, and surrounded a ghastly looking figure.

They were all surprised, but there was one of the party who was actually amazed.

There upon the hedge stood Andy the Mex. The figure was no ghost, but the man in life.

The gang surrounded the man, and many questions were asked; but the strangely resuscitated desperado did not appear disposed to answer any questions.

The men halted for a few moments, when Sarto mounted one of the horses which had been ridden by one of the condemned men; the latter were mounted on one animal.

It was remarked by one of the gang:

"Sarto, I reckon, has been in a scrimmage."

The man rode along with the party, and strangely enough wheeled into a position next to Black Raven, the disguised detective.

As the men rode along Andy the Mex asked:

"What's your racket to-night?"

"We're going to the precipice."

The precipice was a place remote in the mountains, where numerous murders had taken place; it was, indeed, a place of horror, sometimes called the "Slope to Hell;" indeed, a dozen different and equally horrible appellations were applied to the locality.

A tree grew out of a crevice and overhanging a deep ravine, and upon that tree many executions of Judge Lynch had taken place.

The man's answer told the story; the two men who rode upon the one horse were being led forth to die.

At length the men reached the precipice; torches were lighted, and as they moved about in their masks under the lurid glare of the burning pitch, they looked what they were, so many heartless demons.

Black Raven was placed as a guard over the two condemned men, while the gang completed the final arrangements.

The gags were still in the mouths of the doomed prisoners; Black Raven watched an opportunity, and approaching close to them whispered.

"Have hope! a friend is near!" As the detective spoke he took his knife and cut the cords which held the gags.

The gang were passing a bottle around; they were gathered in a close group and paying no attention to the prisoners whom they believed were under a good guard; and, indeed, they were under the care of a good guard, a man who, as stated, was resolved to rescue them or die with them.

It was a critical moment, and only a deaf man like Black Raven could have so skillfully performed the cutting.

The moment the men were free of the gags Raven asked:

"How are you bound?"

"With cords!" came the answer.

The detective again used his knife, and the hands of one of the men were freed.

"Take the knife," said the detective, "and free your comrade."

The man obeyed, and the deaf and silent manner in which he acted proved to the detective that they were not ordinary men.

The little freedom game had not occupied more than a few seconds.

"Who are you?" asked the detective.

The man answered, and the detective recognized the two marshals whose mysterious disappearance had never been previously explained.

"Who are you?" came the question.

"Black Raven!"

The two men gave a start beneath the gowns which enveloped them upon hearing that terrible name, but to them it meant life and liberty!

"We must fight!" said our hero.

"We only ask the chance!" came the reply.

Black Raven passed each of the men a pistol. He had disarmed the man whom he had "downed" and whom he was personating.

"How long have you been prisoners?" asked the detective.

"Over two months."

"They have set to 'drop you out' to-night?"

"Yes; they held court this very night."

"We must arrange our plan of action."

"How do you advise?"

"You must save your shots; we can make short work of them and make it a sure go; you must wait until they surround you to let in on their closing act, when you must lay round with your butts, and then come to the shooting; meanwhile I will not be idle, my boys."

A few moments later the scrummage commenced.

CHAPTER XVI.

The mooners had passed the bottle clear round, and had finished all the preliminaries for the tragic performance.

Half a dozen of them started over toward the doomed men.

"Now is your time, boys; watch!"

Black Raven stepped to one side as the six executioners approached, and an instant later the prisoners were surrounded.

Two of the men reached forward to grasp the doomed victims by the arm, when the fun commenced.

The two men who had reached forward to grasp the prisoners were felled to the ground; in a trice the enveloping gowns fell aside from the two doomed men, and the war was opened.

Curses fell from the lips of the balance of the band; the denouement was most unexpected to them; they had not dreamed of such a contingency.

The two men commenced blazing away, and Black Raven also let out a few bangs!

The mooners were taken by surprise; the incident had come upon them so suddenly they lost all nerve, all presence of mind, and scattered.

The men fled to where their horses were picketed, mounted, and rode away like mad. A short distance down the road they met Bifilar, who had succeeded in releasing himself. He related his story, and the party moved on and soon disappeared in the darkness.

Meantime Black Raven was taking it comfortably and triumphantly with the two released marshals.

"I am glad you are here, boys!" said Black Raven. "I have trailed down two marked men; they are wanted by the United States District Attorney for the district, and you shall take them in charge; and so much of my work will be cleared up!"

Black Raven gave a signal, and like a little black spirit, or gnome springing from the earth, Chris Wonder appeared.

"Hello!" exclaimed one of the marshals, "what have we here? an imp of darkness?"

"This is my aid," said Black Raven.

Black Raven gave his wonderful little aid some directions, and concluded the mandate.

"Now get!"

The little darkey disappeared, and Black Raven said:

"Now, boys, we'll camp till morning."

The detective led the way to a remote little valley in the mountains, and he and the two marshals spread out for the balance of the night.

It was daylight when the men awoke; they had passed the night without any exciting incident.

"Now, boys, we'll have a busy day," said Raven. "My meeting with you was lucky. I

was just ready to lay hands on the two men we're after, but some new business has fallen into my hands, and I had no time to spare; as an escort, you two gentlemen shall do the police."

The three men started along the mountain paths and walked for about an hour, when they arrived in sight of a plain little red farm-house.

A man was sitting on the humble porch as the three men approached, and a pallor overspread his face as he strained his eyes in scanning their features.

The detective made a sign with his hand, and the pallor vanished from the man's face. He came forward and greeted his visitors.

"Raven, you're welcome, and your friends, also."

"How have you been getting along, Bidwell?"

"To tell the truth, I've passed an uneasy time; the mountain men have been prowling around my premises lately. I've an idea they suspect me."

"When you think it's dangerous to remain, old man, pull stakes."

The men were soon well fed, and after his meal our hero asked:

"Where is the trunk?"

"Up in your room."

The detective led his companions to an upper room, where an old black trunk was produced. Black Raven opened the trunk, and drew forth a curious assortment of clothing.

His companions at once understood the play-disguises were in order.

About half an hour following the disappearance of the three men upstairs, three entirely different-looking men came down:

"You've a job on hand, I see."

"Yes, Bidwell; two dangerous men will bid good-bye to the section round here to-day."

"You are going to close in?"

"Yes."

"What neighbors will we lose?"

"Weldon and Pleasant."

"Where will you find them?"

"I don't know yet; but I've a courier out who will bring me the information."

"I don't know, Raven. I know you are a level-headed man, but I think you are taking a big risk. Weldon and Pleasant are the biggest guns in the mountains."

"Those are the men I want. I propose to begin at the high note and run down the scale."

The owner of the red farm house beckoned to Black Raven, indicating that he had something private to tell him.

The two men walked aside, when Bidwell said:

"We've a mystery around here."

"A mystery?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"My children were over in the woods the other day, when their lunch was shared by a most beautiful young lady—a lady in white."

The detective was all attention at once.

"How old are the children?"

"The eldest is eight."

"What did they see?"

"Well, it's my idea that some crazy girl is wandering about the mountain; the children say she was a beautiful young lady, dressed in white, but her clothes were all torn and tattered, and her hair tangled."

"How many times have your children met her?"

"Twice."

"You say you think she is a crazy girl?"

"Yes."

"What makes you think she is a crazy girl?"

"The children have repeated some of her sayings; but, tell me, have you any suspicion as to her identity?"

"To speak truly I think I have."

"Who is she?"

"I can not tell you now, but you can do me a favor."

"How?"

"Lay low and capture the beautiful mystery."

"I will."

"Bring her to your house and hold her until you see me."

"I will."

"Treat her tenderly."

"Certainly."

The detective and his companions a few moments later were on the way to the town where they expected to find their game. Some strange adventures followed the fulfilment of their scheme.

CHAPTER XVII.

OUR hero had stated that the time approached for him to gather in the results of all his perils and trials in the mountains. He had come to the district with a list of names of men whom he was expected to run down and capture.

As our hero and his friends walked along, one of them remarked:

"You're going to take long chances, Raven."

"Yes; I am going to take very long chances."

"Are we in sufficient force?"

"I think so."

"We ought to calculate well, comrade."

"If you feel shaky, you will be of no use to me."

"Oh, I'm not shaky. I only desire to make sure. I'll stay with you, and go with you, eyes wide open, and take all chances, but there is no need to take unnecessary risks."

The men had arranged a manual of signals, so that, at a critical moment, they could communicate plans and purposes.

"Are you going to strike in the town during daylight?"

"No."

"Where do you lay-in first?"

"We will most probably find our game at Saunders' place."

"A bad hole to enter."

It was late in the afternoon when the men stepped aside from the road, and took a rest under a clump of trees that shaded the spot where a comfortable house had once stood.

An hour passed, when Black Raven started suddenly to his feet.

His companions also leaped to their feet, and one of them exclaimed:

"What's up?"

The detective uttered a whistle, and there came a sound like a bird.

The detective once more whistled, and his companions discerned that the bird call came directly in answer to the whistle, and they knew that signals were being exchanged.

The detective turned toward them and said:

"It's all right, boys."

The men stood silent a moment, when suddenly through the brush came the head of the "What Is It?" little Chris Wonder; and, indeed, he looked like a wonder as his odd looking little cranium bobbed around in the foliage.

A moment later, and he came stealing forth like a brown-coated hare.

"Am you dar, colonel?"

"I am here."

"De geenmen yer am arter am in de town."

"Where?"

"At Saunders'. Golly, yes, and dey are boun' fer stay dat some time."

"How is the town generally, Christ?"

"All quiet, sah."

"Boys," said our hero, "we can now arrange our plans."

The men were all well armed, and were well disguised for the work they had on hand.

They held a long consultation and finally separated.

Little Chris walked along with the detective, and our hero made some additional inquiries of the lad, and gave him final instructions.

Our hero entered the town just at dusk; his appearance was ordinary and commonplace, and he sauntered along like a man who was at home in the place. He did not cast furtive glances to the right or to the left, but took the promenade in an easy gait.

He went direct toward Saunders' place.

The resort was sort of hotel in appearance; there was a race-track connected with it, and several other arrangements were about the place for the accommodation of the peculiar class of customers who frequented therabouts.

There were billiard-rooms, and an immense bar room, bowling-alleys, and skittle grounds; indeed, it was a sporting resort out and out.

The gambling-rooms were on the second floor, and a man could find as many games there as at the famous Monte Carlo.

Black Raven entered the bar room, and his entrance occasioned no comment. He was an ordinary-looking man, such as was to be seen lounging around through all the various amusement-rooms of the hotel.

The detective went to the bar-room, and pretended to take a drink, but not a drop of liquor crossed his lips. Our hero was laying for his opening, and he did not have to wait long.

A man, a rough-looking fellow, had been sitting in the bar-room as our hero entered, and watching an opportunity, he advanced and addressed the detective.

Black Raven was waiting for an opening.
"Is your name Dordon?"
"You mean Dordon, of Denver?"
"Yes."
"I know him, but I was never taken for him before."
"Are you from Denver?"
"Well, yes, I'm from Denver because I am here, but Denver ain't my home."
"Are you on biz?"
"No."
"How does it run with you?"
The detective pulled out a big roll of bills, and answered:
"I'm not complaining, and I'm taking a little recreation."
"Are you looking for a game?"
"Well, no; I'm resting. I've had a long sitting, got in with a regular crowd of business men who won't sit with professionals; you see, I had it easy."

The detective laughed in a complacent manner, in fact, he was acting his part to perfection, but a terrible denouement was impending all the time.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE man with whom our hero was talking was on the flats. He had been left, financially, high and dry. He was a bad fellow, high-toned, and dressy when in funds, but very humble and cringing when "broke." He was a "sneak-gambler," a "roper-in," a "guy, or panderer," and what is called in large cities, a "steerer." He laid around to catch the unwary with the purpose of running them into a snap game.

"You had a soft thing," he said, in answer to the stranger's statement as to having had a sitting with a number of business men.

"Yes, I did have a soft thing," responded the disguised detective; "but they tumbled right in the midst of my 'pudding,' and I had to hunt lively."

"Wouldn't you like to go upstairs and see the game that's in progress?"

"Not this evening. I can't stand it."

"You needn't get in."

"I know that, one way, but I'd have to ask for a hand, another; I'm ahead now, and I'm resting."

The detective went out from the bar-room and sauntered into the billiard-room. He was going very slow.

In the billiard-room Black Raven saw a man knocking the balls around on a table.

A moment, and the two men exchanged glances, and there was a tale told in their eye-gleams.

Black Raven commenced thumping with his finger on the rail of a table, and there would have been betrayed a certain method and regularity in this thumping to the ear of a telegraph operator.

Meantime, the fellow who had been talking to our hero went upstairs to the room where the big game was in progress. He arrived just in time to see the last deal.

As it subsequently appeared, Weldon and Pleasant had set in together to fleece a man who had come over on purpose to rattle with them, believing them to be square players.

Weldon and Pleasant were supposed to be heavy in the illicit business, and among their own class were looked upon as square men over a card-table.

As stated, the last deal was set out just as the man Russell entered the room.

The two men who had played in for a steal were winners, and were correspondingly jubilant over their winnings.

Half an hour passed, when the man Russell got a chance to speak to Weldon. He said:

"There is a big fish down-stairs."

"Eh? who is he?"

"A stranger."

"Where does he hail from?"

"Denver."

"Is he looking for a game?"

"No; he has just come out of a sitting with business men; he's pulled a pile, and he's resting, but he's got the fever."

"Can't you feed him?"

"That's what I'm doing."

"How are you fixed?"

"An elephant has stepped on my wallet."

"Are you sure he's good?"

"I think he's bigger than the man you just had a sitting with and he's a big idea of his game."

Weldon handed the man a twenty-dollar bill, and said:

"Lay close to him."

The two men separated.

Weldon retired to his home.

Russell descended to where the detective had seated himself in the bar room,

"Will you remain in town?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You wouldn't like to do a little limited game would you?"

"Single handed?"

"We might get one or two in."

"I don't mind, for amusement; but I am not going into anything heavy, and I quit on a deal."

"That's all right; it's only to pass the time."

The man whom the detective had exchanged glances with in the billiard-room was sitting in the bar room.

The detective's fingers played a rattle on the table, and the man sauntered over.

"Mebbe that man will get in for a short sitting," said the detective, and he addressed the seeming stranger. "We're going to play a little limited for fun, stranger. Will you lay in, to pass the time?"

"I don't mind."

A fourth man was found—a respectable-looking gentleman, whom one would not expect to have found in such a place.

The men went upstairs, and the game opened.

Russell struck a run of luck, and he became greatly excited. The game lasted for some hours, and when it concluded, Russell had dropped all his winnings, also the twenty dollars which had been his stake when starting in.

"I'd like to bring you and a couple of friends of mine into a game," said Russell.

"Who are your friends? Do I know them?"

The man looked mysterious, and intimated to our hero that he had something to tell him in private.

The detective fell off, and a few moments later the party broke up.

Russell came to our hero and said:

"I'll let you into a good thing if you will whack."

"Why don't you take it yourself?"

"They know me."

"Don't start out with the idea that I'm a duffer, my friend!"

"I've no such idea; ain't I proving it by offering to let you in on a *sure thing*?"

"Are you sure you can get the other men in on the game?"

"I think so; in fact, I'm sure they will go in on anything; they think they can make, every time."

"Who are your men?"

"They are distillers; they're full, and if it's played nice, won't squeal."

"Are you sure you can work it so they won't tumble in advance?"

"I tell you they are eager; they'll take every chance that comes along."

"You might see them and learn what the chances are."

"I will; meantime can't you open up the scheme to the other man?"

"He's a stranger to me."

"To me also, but I reckon he's laying for chances; that's what he's here for."

"Couldn't you tackle him?"

"It would come better from you."

"I don't think so; you've opened the thing to me pretty well, you might do it just as well with him."

"I'll try it if you say so, old man."

"Certainly; if he's willing to go in, I am."

Russell walked over toward the other man, and the little finger-thumping was begun by Black Raven.

The finger-telegraph did the business.

Russell got on pretty well with the other man. The latter, however, was offish as to taking Black Raven for a partner. He said:

"I've a 'pard' will be here to-morrow."

"Take him in and make it a *sure thing*."

The fact was, the fellow Russell was laying for a sure win for himself. He knew that Weldon and Pleasant were good, but no man is invincible; and there was a chance that the three men might win, and he was arranging so as to come in for a rake, no matter which party left the table winners.

The three men were brought together, and the whole scheme was talked over, and finally it was agreed that the little "sitting" would take place.

Some time later our hero and his regular

"pals" were alone. They talked over the whole matter and set to complete the arrangements.

Upon the following morning Russell met Weldon, and told him of the scheme he had up.

"Can't the game be made for a sitting in some private place?"

"That could be done."

"Where could we go?"

"To my house."

"How about your family?"

"My family are all away."

"Your house is out of town?"

"You might scare a bevy of boarding-school girls, all screaming in chorus, and no one would be the wiser."

"A little noise would not be overheard?"

"No, sir."

"These men are all strangers?"

"All strangers."

"You are sure?"

"I am."

CHAPTER XIX.

LATER in the day Russell met our hero, and the men once more talked over the scheme; and finally it was arranged that the meeting should take place at the house of Russell, that same evening, ten o'clock.

Russell brought the men together during the afternoon. Weldon's first salutation was a stunner.

"Hello, old man," he said, "I reckon you and I have met before!"

"Very likely," came the steady reply.

"Don't you remember me, sir?"

"I can't say that I do."

"Well, I can't place you; but my friend here tells me you get into a sitting once in awhile."

"I do, occasionally."

"Well, I've a pretty good idea of my luck."

"Let me see! Your name is—"

"Bettis."

"I reckon we can have a good game."

"I hope so."

The men indulged in a long talk. About dark that evening a little bit of strategy was in progress, but a pair of shrewd eyes were fixed on the cuttings.

Black Raven was strolling through the town, when from behind a stoop there appeared to him an apparition, but not clothed in white.

"Hello, colonel!"

"Hello, Chris!"

"Well, colonel, I've been dat!"

"What did you discover, my little man?"

"Dat wer five men let into der house yer tolle dials yere chile to keep his eye on dis yere evening!"

"Did you see their faces?"

"Yes, sah."

"Describe them."

The little darky gave an accurate description of all the men.

Black Raven noted the description, and was able to locate each man.

A moment he pondered. He discerned that Weldon and Pleasant were not taking any chances; they were secretly "stacking" the house with their confederates, in order to "stack" the cards without risk.

"You can get into that house without knocking at the front door?"

"Seberal times, colonel."

"Did the men you saw carry arms?"

"Dey wer all wukking arsenals, colonel!"

Black Raven held a long talk with Chris, and instructed the little darky as to the part he was to play in the impending drama.

The detective walked over toward Saunders' place. To himself he remarked:

"Weldon, old man, you are laying out your scheme, and so am I!"

Russell was at Saunders' place; the hour was nine o'clock.

"You're on deck."

"Yes, I'm on deck."

"I suppose you know I'm looking for a rake?"

"You're looking for one—yes?"

"Am I to get it?"

"That depends."

"I don't understand."

"You may be putting up a job!"

"Then I'd lose my rake sure."

A few moments later, and our hero's pals joined him.

The four men started, under Russell's guidance, for the latter's house, and ere morning some startling incidents enlivened the meeting of the players.

Black Raven and his party reached the rendezvous first, and a quiet little talk was in progress when Weldon and Pleasants were announced.

Russell's house was, indeed, well situated for just such a scene as was to occur beneath its roof.

Weldon came in, and was in quite a merry mood.

"I see you are on hand, gentlemen."

The others laughed good-naturedly, and all appeared as easy and social as though the men had been lifelong friends.

"I suppose we want a little preliminary talk," said Weldon. "We are here for business as well as fun."

Black Raven answered:

"I like your style; it looks as though there would be no whining from the loser."

"That's good; you set us down for a loser."

"Well, mebbe."

"Now, then, gentlemen, in the first place, there must be no limit; we propose to play a big game; no baby play for me."

"That's all right!" came the response.

"And now one more point; the man who is caught working-in any funny business, forfeits to the table a pot to be played for every dollar in his clothes!"

"Who shall decide what is funny business?"

"We're all players; that can easily be decided."

"A false claim might be made."

"I reckon not."

Black Raven said in a merry tone:

"We will make the devil referee."

The men all laughed.

"Who will bring him on?" demanded Weldon.

"I will," said Raven.

"He's a friend of yours?"

"Well, we do lay in together occasionally." The cards were produced, and Russell set up a table and chairs.

The men cast around for deal.

The party of players was composed of five.

Black Raven won the deal.

The cards were dealt round, and each man looked at his hand.

Four men "stayed in." The dealer threw up his hand, and the balance called for two and three cards to fill with.

Pleasants, after receiving his additional cards, went out, and our hero's two pals and Weldon "stayed in."

The betting commenced and went too high for one of Black Raven's friends, and the tilt settled down to a "rigid" between Weldon and one of the marshals.

Betting went high for a first deal, but Weldon "called."

The marshal laid down a winning hand.

Weldon turned pale, growled liberally, but made no other demonstration.

The next dealer was Pleasants.

At different stages of the game the three detectives passed out, and left the "rigid" to Weldon and Pleasants.

The two men called on a small bet.

One of the marshals dealt next, and each man "stayed in;" but finally the stand-off settled down to Black Raven and Pleasants.

The betting once more ran high and when the call came Black Raven laid down a winning "hand."

Pleasants indulged a growl.

The next dealer was Weldon, and, strangely enough, the three detectives once more passed out their hands, and left it to Weldon and Pleasants to bet.

Once more the confederates made a quick call on a low bet, and the deal fell to another of the marshals.

Again all stayed in, and the betting finally settled down to three men, Weldon, Black Raven, and one of the marshals, and when the call came the detective once more let down a winning hand or the table.

The game was running peculiar. Any of our readers who play hrye already discerned the lit-tle racket the three detectives were working.

"Funny business" was undoubtedly in progress; there was no actual cheating going on, but it was a queer game.

Both Weldon and Pleasants growled a good deal; the queer part of the game consisted in the fact that every time either Pleasants or Weldon dealt, the betting was left to them exclusively, while the three detectives only came in

when one or the other of their own party flinched the cards.

It was Black Raven's deal, and the result of the play was that one of our hero's pals raked in a big pot.

It was at this moment the drama opened.

Weldon said:

"Let that money lay there!"

"What's the matter?"

"Let the money lay; you can't take it!"

"Who says so?"

"I do."

"Who are you?"

The inquiry came in a threatening tone.

"You can not browbeat any one here, my friend."

"Let the pot lay."

"What do you propose?"

"To have you fellows lay the money you've chiseled on the table."

"You squeal because you've been beaten at your own game."

"We do, eh?"

"Yes."

"Lay down the money."

"Not this evening, some other evening, love, unless you win it."

"Do you claim to have won it square?"

"Yes; and I'll leave it out!"

"To whom?"

"Russell or the devil!"

Russell, during all the time, had sat pale and silent.

"What do you say, Russell?"

The man was in a quandary. He had the prospect of the largest stake in case Black Raven and his friends were the winners.

"I am sorry you have a misunderstanding, gentlemen."

"Has it been a square game?"

"As far as I can see, yes."

"You—"

"Hold on, Weldon, no hard names!" called Black Raven.

"I don't like your talk, mister!" suddenly exclaimed Weldon, in a savage tone.

"Well, you know your remedy."

"Ah! that's your game?"

"Yes."

"You think you have it soft, eh?"

"I think I'll have it square."

"There's been nothing square."

"You are mistaken."

"You talk loud."

"Well, yes."

"You think because you are three to one you can do as you please."

"You have, Russell."

"He's decided in your favor."

"Because we've the right of it."

"I'll leave it to others."

"Will you?"

"Yes."

"So will I."

"Who will you leave it to?"

"The devil."

"You're very funny, ain't you?"

"Well, yes."

"Go ahead, and leave it to your friend."

Black Raven was prepared to mingle comedy with tragedy, and he rapped upon the table, and called:

"Are you there?"

The answer came:

"Yes."

"Ah!" remarked Weldon. "I tumble."

"What have you caught?"

"You're a trickster; but it won't work!"

"A trickster, eh?"

"Yes."

"What kind?"

"I've had that game tried on me before."

"What game?"

"Ventriloquism."

"Ah, I see; you think it's ventriloquism?"

"Yes. I think you and your friends are in together, that you're stands, up to smart legerdemain, but it don't take here. So lay down the money."

"Suppose the devil appears in person?"

"I've had enough of your trickery."

"But suppose the devil comes right in here, old man?"

"Let him come."

"You say so?"

"Yes."

"Well, here he is!"

the oddest looking specimens of darkydom that ever exclaimed, "How is yer?" this side of Africa.

The men all stared in amazement, even Black Raven pretended to be surprised.

"Where did you come from?" demanded Weldon, in an angry tone, having recovered from his first shock of amazement.

"Dar."

The little darky pointed downward.

Turning to our hero, the man demanded:

"Is this a put up job?"

"I don't know; mebbe so."

Weldon puckered up his lips to whistle, but a revolver was clapped to his cheek; at the same time a revolver was placed at the ear of Pleasants.

"Speak, either of you, and you are dead men!" came the caution.

Russell made an attempt to sneak out of the room. The latter individual was an ardent coward. A knife was held upon his cheek, and the man resumed his seat.

Black Raven had carried through his purpose thus far successfully, but it required nerve and address to complete his game.

He drew a pair of handcuffs from his pocket, and in a deft manner slipped them upon Weldon's wrists, while at the same instant one of his aids performed the same service for Pleasants.

The detectives had fully arranged all the details of their desperate undertaking. As the handcuffs were adjusted, Weldon appeared to realize the seriousness of the situation, but he was helpless; the cold muzzle of a revolver all the time lay against his cheek.

The two men were secure, when our hero turned his attention to Russell. There was nothing to fear from the latter, save the chance of his giving an alarm.

In a few moments Russell was bound and gagged, and then the detective spoke.

Addressing Weldon, he said:

"I propose to remove you from this building. I will avoid a fight if I can. I know there are a dozen men in this house. I have a large force at my command; if you attempt to make an outcry, you will get a bullet through your brain, and all your friends will be killed."

"Who are you?" came the query, in a whisper.

"I am Black Raven!"

The expression that came over Weldon's face was terrible to behold. The look of horror was like that which one would expect to behold upon the face of a man suddenly condemned to death.

"Remember!" said Black Raven; and he added: "Come!"

The party passed from the house and walked rapidly down the road.

A few yards down the road and they came to where a wagon and pair of horses were secured.

Chris Wonder acted as driver.

At daylight upon the following morning the two prisoners were handed over to the authorities, but Black Raven, the man who had accomplished the arrest, was not present.

The detective had left the party when they reached a certain point in the journey where assistance was secured.

Our hero and his "pard," Chris, returned afoot toward the mountains, and daylight found them at the base of the rock castle.

Meantime the déboulement had followed in the house of the duped Russell.

The five men whom Weldon and Pleasants had secured to aid them in their little scheme against the disguised Black Raven, were concealed in Russell's house.

The men, however, had been informed that they were not to appear until they received a certain signal. They were not to break in upon merely hearing an unusual noise, and the above directions were all favorable to our hero.

The men had been upstairs some hours and no signal came, and they reached the conclusion that all was progressing favorably for their friends below stairs.

The men at length all dropped off into a sound sleep, but they were soon awakened by one of their number, who said:

"Hello, comrades, we've all been snoozing!"

"What of it? No signal has sounded, or we would have heard it."

"We can't tell whether there came any signal or not."

"We can go below and take a look."

The men descended the stairs and were soon all gathered in front of the door where the game had been in progress.

CHAPTER XX.

In response to our hero's rap, there suddenly appeared in the midst of the gamblers one of

The door was opened, and the men, single file, stole into the room. Soon the first man stumbled and fell, and in order to save himself clutched the man next to him and both went down.

They had fallen over the prostrate and bound form of Russell.

There followed immediate confusion, and one of the men exclaimed:

"Bring a light!"

A few moments elapsed, and one of the men returned into the room with a light.

There lay Russell, his eyes wide open and evidently alive.

"Hello, old man, what's up here?" came the question.

Russell made no reply. As our readers will remember, the man was gagged, as well as bound hand and foot.

The men speedily made the discovery of the latter fact.

The thongs that bound Russell were speedily cut, and the gag removed from his mouth.

"What has happened, old man?"

"Weldon and Pleasants are gomers!"

"How so?"

"Black Raven!"

"What of Black Raven, old man?"

"He was here."

"Explain."

"Can't you understand? The player was the terror in disguise; his two friends were detectives; Weldon and Pleasants are prisoners!"

"By thunder, boys, this is the worst dupe we ever got!"

Russell explained the details of the skillful capture.

The men left the house, and before sunset the next day it was well known in all interested quarters that Weldon and Pleasants had been captured—carried right out of their stronghold by that wonderful man, Black Raven.

Meantime, as stated in a previous chapter, our hero, with his little "What Is It?" had reached his rock castle.

Black Raven needed rest. He was but a mortal, despite his wonderful courage, nerve, and endurance.

The pair ascended through the inner rock passage, and at length reached the detective's eyrie. As they entered the rock chamber, the dog, Tiger, made a spring at Chris.

The little darky uttered a scream of terror, and ejaculated:

"Golly! Jes' as dis vere chile 'spected! Dat am de debbil's imp, shuh!"

Black Raven was greatly amused at the little darky's antics, but succeeded after awhile in pacifying him.

Chris and the dog Tiger were made good friends.

The detective set out a meal for himself and his strange little companion, and soon after both went to sleep.

The detective slept until well into the afternoon, when he awoke. He found little Chris wide awake.

The detective said, after a moment:

"You can do me a good service, Chris."

"How am dat?"

"I want you to look out for a ghost."

"I jes' tought yer wer up to some such gum game, colonel; now I se shuh dat dis am no place fer dis vere chile."

The detective fully explained the whole matter to the little darky.

"Golly, colonel, am dat so?"

"Yes."

"Yer gwine ter tell dis vere chile dat it wer de French gal, Alvia Auman, dat am runnin' aroun' in white?"

"That is just what I suspect, Chris."

"I se jes' yur man, colonell! Yer kin depend on dis vere chile every time, ef dat am de racket!"

"If you see her, Chris, you must follow her."

"I'se boun' ter do dat, too."

The detective instructed Chris in the mystery of the egress and exit to and from the rock cavern, and, giving him additional instructions, left him.

The sun was still up when Black Raven started on his journey toward the home of Bidwell.

It was after sundown when he reached the home of his friend.

"You have arrived just in time," was the information the detective received.

"Have you found the ghost?"

"No; but they are set to make a ghost of me."

"What is that you are telling me?"

"I've received warning."

"What will you do, my friend?"

"Stay and fight it out on this line. I was born here, and I'll die here, before I'll be driven away!"

"But your family?"

"I've sent them all away."

"And you are alone?"

"No; I've two good friends here."

"Then there are four of us."

"If you remain with us, yes."

"I'll remain; but when do you expect the visit?"

"I was warned to get away before sundown."

"They may come to-night?"

"Yes."

"What is the charge against you?"

"Oh, I have been under suspicion for a long time; you were seen here day before yesterday."

"But is that so?"

"Yes; and I'm accused of giving the information which led to the capture of Weldon and Pleasants, I suppose."

"Were you accused to that effect?"

"No; but I learned that there were watchers when you were here."

"Who brought you the information?"

"A colored friend of mine."

"Have you plenty of arms and ammunition?"

"Plenty."

"Enough to stand a long siege?"

"Yes."

"They will probably come in a large force."

"That's my idea."

"Well, let them come."

"That is what I say; they will down me or let me alone in future."

"It will not be for long, Bidwell. I've got the identity of all the men I'm after, and when I get in on them as I did on Weldon and Pleasants, it will be safer for a man around here."

"I will be glad to see the day when they are cleared out; this battle against an organized gang is up-hill work."

"But tell me about the ghost."

"I've something strange to tell you."

CHAPTER XXI.

"THEN you saw her?"

"Yes."

"And you have tracked her?"

"I told you about her dividing lunch with my children?"

"Yes."

"And the day you were here I sent them out to the woods, intending to watch. I did so, but I did not see her."

"Did she come?"

"Yes."

"How was it you did not see her?"

"She did not come until I had left off watching."

"That would show she was a mortal, old man."

"Wait until you hear. I remained hiding until satisfied that she would not come, when I left, and I had not been gone far when she appeared."

"To the children?"

"Yes."

"In what manner?"

"She appeared and beckoned to one of them to come to her. The child started to go, and when she reached the place the beautiful young lady had been transformed into a gigantic negro."

"Nonsense!"

"Wait until you hear. The negro caught the child in his arms, and the child said: 'Let me go!' and screamed; and the negro said: 'I am the pretty lady; do not be afraid; come with me!' I heard the child scream, and ran back. The children called out, 'Papa is coming!' when the ogre dropped the child and ran."

The detective was amused and interested, and remained silent. He wished to hear the sequel to the extraordinary tale before he asked any questions.

"I would have thought it was some negro who had appeared upon the scene, if the child had not seen the object change back into the original form of the young lady as it ran away."

"The child saw the young girl again then?"

"No, sir; the child saw the negro transform into the young girl."

"And you believe that?"

"I do."

"All right," said the detective, as a quiet smile played over his face; "we will solve the mystery."

"When you solve that mystery, you will find that you are chasing a ghost indeed."

While the men stood talking, the sun went down and the surrounding hills were enveloped in darkness.

The men entered the house, and arrangements were made for a fight.

It was well on toward midnight when the four men who were waiting to defend the house received an intimation that the foe had come upon them.

A band of about twenty horsemen appeared at the edge of the wood. The night was clear, and their numbers could be easily ascertained.

Two of the men dismounted, and came over toward the house.

"Let me do the parleying," said the detective.

The men approached the house and came to a halt, when one of them discharged a pistol.

The discharge of the weapon was a summons.

Black Raven lay upon his face opposite a small attic window, and, from his vantage-ground, he called:

"What is wanted?"

"Who are you?"

"Harry Raven."

The men showed signs of surprise, and hastened back to their comrades.

The detective had disclosed his identity and presence with a fixed purpose. He knew it would be a combat against large odds, and he wished to take all the advantage that lay in his prestige as the terror of the mooners.

The men returned, as stated, to their comrades, and one of them said:

"Boys, we've a big job on hand."

"The house is packed?"

"There is one man there who is a host in himself."

"Black Raven?" came the query.

"Yes."

The captain of the band of riders was an old hand at the business, and like many others of his ilk, he was a brave and desperate man.

"I'm glad he's there, boys. We've got him in a trap this time, sure."

"But he may have a large force with him."

"No; you make up your mind there are not more than two or three in that house, or Black Raven won't remain cooped!"

"You will attack the house?"

"What did we come here for, my good fellows?"

"That's what we came here for."

"Then we will carry out our purpose. We will never again have as good a chance to wipe out Black Raven! Go back and ask him to surrender."

The men laughed.

"Why do you laugh?"

"At the idea of asking Black Raven to surrender."

"Wait until you hear my proposition. Black Raven knows me."

"Does he?"

"Yes. Go tell him that, if he will surrender, he shall have a free pass to leave the mountains, on condition he promises never to reappear here."

"Do you suppose he is asking such a privilege?"

"Yes, I do."

"You are the captain; we will obey your commands; but we will get a laugh for our pains. I know whom we have to deal with better than you do."

The men walked over to deliver their message.

Black Raven "lay low" at the attic window waiting the return of the two spokesmen.

The men called out:

"Raven, we'd have a word with you."

"Go ahead."

"If you surrender and promise to leave the mountains, not to return within one year, you are to have a free pass and safe conduct."

"Who promises this?"

"Gansway."

The two envoys heard a satirical laugh, and a moment later there came the answer:

"Give my respects to Gansway, and tell him I'll fight him and any two of his men single-handed, one to three, on condition that all hands will bind themselves by an oath to protest, in future, at all hazards, the home of Bidwell."

The men returned to their companions.

"What does he say?" demanded Gansway. The men repeated the message.

Gansway was silent a moment, but at length said:

"Black Raven is a trickster; we will take him once at his own game."

"How?"

"We will accept his proposition."

"And fight him three to one?"

"Twenty to one; let him come out, and we will make a target of him."

Ordinarily, the men, desperate as they were, would not have resorted to so mean an expedient, but their fear and hatred of Black Raven was so intense they were prepared to adopt any game to wipe him out.

The men returned, and Black Raven announced himself ready to hear their answer.

"Your proposition is accepted."

"Gansway and two other men will fight me?"

"Yes."

"And abide by the condition?"

"Yes."

"All right," said Black Raven.

"Will you come forth to meet them?" asked the riders.

"Not to-night."

"When?"

"Send them in here, and they shall carry me out, or I will throw them out."

One of the men imagined he saw the detective's head; the man was a dead shot, and he thought it a good chance. He raised his carbine and fired.

The following instant there came a flash from the window, and the man who had fired the shot lay down; it was his last shot.

A shout rose from the gang as they saw the result of the detective's shot, and they made a grand rush for the house; bullets flew like hail and answering shots came.

The fusillade on both sides was a failure as to fatal results, until two or three men made a rush to break in the door of the cottage; one of them went down and the other two fled back.

The gang withdrew.

A consultation was held,

"We must fire the house," said the captain; "we've got our man this time; but already it has cost us two valuable lives."

The men made their preparations. They retired into the woods, and each man ignited a torch.

It was a strange and startling sight when they came marching forth, with their tattered sticks burning with a lurid light.

Addressing Black Raven, Bidwell said:

"Comrade, if they ever get one of those torches on this roof overhead, it's all up with us; the old shingles are so many tinder-sponges."

"You are right. It looks bad, but we must do the best we can. We have been merciful; but now the moment for fatal execution has arrived. They must never come near enough to cast one of those brands on the house. But we must be ready in case of accident."

"What can we do?"

"Open the scuttle first."

"It would be certain death for any man to go on the roof."

"It will be certain death if the house takes fire. We must prepare for all contingencies. Go down and bring up a couple of pails of water."

"Water will do no good, I tell you, if one of those brands are lodged on the roof."

"We will be ready, anyhow."

The scuttle was opened, and the two pails of water were brought. Meantime, the gang had scattered, and a dozen men were approaching the house in as many different directions.

"They have struck the right method," whispered Bidwell.

"We must down some of them; this time it is in self-defense. Select each a man, and let fly."

The besieged obeyed orders. Two men with their torches fell over; two shots had sped with fatal effect.

The incendiaries turned and ran away, all but one. The latter, a desperate fellow, ran in and cast his torch upon the roof. His aim was good, his strength equal to the task, and the torch lodged in a good spot to take hold.

Black Raven leaped through the scuttle, and, like a great figure of wrath, appeared upon the roof.

A dozen weapons were discharged. The detective, however, seized the blazing brand and

cast it to the ground, and, unscathed, re-entered the garret.

Meantime, the riders held a consultation; they had been amazed at the act they had witnessed.

CHAPTER XXII.

It had been a serious fight. The riders were badly demoralized, four of their number lay dead—four out of twenty, in a little scrimmage, comparatively.

It may appear that the riders were cowards, but any of our readers who have had any experience in gun practice will know better.

The riders were nonplussed. They did not like to give up beat, and yet they did not wish to take the chances of having two or three more of their number knocked over.

The man who had succeeded in throwing on the one burning brand said:

"If you men will make another demonstration, I'll get another brand on that roof."

"A demonstration will cost a couple of lives!" came the reply. "I tell you, when Black Raven shoots a man goes down."

"What shall we do?"

"Wait for another chance to close in on Bidwell."

"But Black Raven is in that house," declared the man who wanted to cast the blazing torch.

"He is there, and likely to stay there, until he is ready to come out."

One of the men suggested:

"We can keep him penned, while we send for reinforcements. We have got him dead, if we work it right, and we may never have another chance."

It was a four hours' job to send for reinforcements and get them there on the spot; but the riders determined to carry out the plan.

Their torches were extinguished, and going well under cover, they set to wait.

Meantime, the men in the house were waiting for a second attack, but after some time had passed, Black Raven said:

"Bidwell, my friend, the time has come for us to retreat."

"And must I leave my old homestead to be burned?"

"The only question is, will you burn with it, or let it burn during your absence? You can leave now, satisfied; we have made a good record; four of the rascals have been out on their last burning racket, that is sure."

"But we have beat them off."

"Do you think so?"

"Yes."

"They have made up their minds to make sure of us."

"Now?"

"They mean to keep us penned here, and they have sent for reinforcements; there will be a hundred men here in a few hours, and then it's good-bye to us and the house."

"Can we get away?"

"Yes."

"They will be on the 'lay' for us."

"But we can fool 'em, sure."

"If it's your judgment to move I am ready."

The four men passed down the stairs, opened the rear door, and one at a time commenced to crawl down toward a clump of bushes.

The riders had been so greatly demoralized they had not set a rear watch; they were resting under the impression that the men in the house would be on the alert for a third attack.

It was not until the men had all escaped that the suggestion was started to place a guard to watch the rear of the house.

The mistake was a simple one.

The guard was set, but the birds had flown.

It was near daylight, when the re-enforcements arrived. Black Raven had made a true calculation, as at least a hundred men arrived upon the scene.

When the men arrived only a few moments' talk was indulged, and a grand rush was made. The house was assailed from every side, but there came no answering shots; the riders advanced, and an entrance was made into the cottage, when curses loud and violent arose on every side.

The discovery was made amidst a volley of oaths that the defenders of the cottage had "fifited"—had got away clean and clear.

Black Raven was a man who improved every chance. He knew that the riders would all be gathered around Bidwell's dwelling. He calculated the time carefully and set to carry out a

scheme he had long calculated. He argued that he would have no better opportunity.

He had the example of Iron Burgess and another daring man to go by, and fully understood the destructive qualities of fire in distilleries.

When Raven and his companion had got well away, the former said:

"Bidwell, your house is doomed."

"Yes; my house will be burned."

"We can get square."

"How?"

"We can carry the war into Africa."

"I have an idea as to what you mean, but can we do it?"

"Yes."

"They keep a heavy watch on their buildings since you have been in the mountains."

"That is so, old man, but they are all watching your house to-night, there has been a grand rally."

"I see your point."

"Are you with me?"

"Yes."

"We have no time to lose."

"Will we want Pete and Jake?"

"No; you and I will go alone."

"I am with you; this sort of revenge is sweet; it has a sort of righteous flavor."

"We are breaking up an unlawful trade; it is not revenge."

"It's revenge with me, no matter what you call it."

The two men dismissed the two faithful colored men, who were safe, as they had not been recognized as having been in the house.

As Black Raven and Bidwell walked rapidly along, the latter said:

"It's still a mystery to me how the riders came to be so blind!"

"In what particular?"

"In letting us coolly walk out of that house."

Black Raven laughed and said:

"I can explain my tery."

"I wish you would."

"It was one of Raven's tricks."

"That may be so—but how did they happen to let Raven play one of his tricks on them?"

"Reputation did it. You see, they have an idea that Black Raven never retreats; but it was one of these occasions this time, you know, when discretion was the better part of valor. I did not expect them to be on the watch, as they were calculating as I told you."

"It was a lucky calculation for us—or miscalculation, rather."

"And for them, too, if we perform well our part between now and sunrise."

The two men kept upon their way, but, suddenly, were brought to a halt.

They had run right into an ambuscade. It was the deadliest point that had ever been played on wonderful Black Raven!

The two men found themselves surrounded.

As they were brought to a halt, the detective whispered, quickly:

"Leave all to me. 'Lay low' for my lead."

It was a terribly dark night. The stars had become hidden behind a cloud, and only figures could be seen—identifications were impossible.

A dozen guns were pointed at the detective's bosom, but, even at such a critical moment his presence of mind did not desert him.

CHAPTER XXIII.

The men had Black Raven and his companion "dead to rights."

The fatal and sure command had come, "Thew up your hands, or you go down!"

It was a humiliating position for the detective, but his hands went up.

The peculiarity of the command in question is that no time is ever lost in fooling; the situation is always imperative; if the hands don't go up, the owner does go down, and no time is lost.

Our hero had been taken clean off his guard. He had not been favored with the slightest warning; it was a complete surprise and perfect ambuscade.

"Where did you fellows come from?" demanded one of the men as the hands of the two ambuscaded men went up.

No answer was made to the inquiry.

"Let's send a ball through them," suggested one of the ambuscaders.

Black Raven was not unnerved; he was playing a trick working up to a game.

"Come, old man, why don't you answer?"

"By jimminti, you vos come so quick as

"eller you vos took his breath away," came the answer.

"We came too quick for you, eh, Dutchy?"

"Ya—a—s."

"Well, where have you come from?"

"I vos come from Macon."

"You came from Macon, eh?"

"Ya—a—s."

"What did you come for?"

"I vos come to look for work."

"You came to look for work, eh?"

"Ya—a—s."

"And your friend here?"

"He vos some dot he look for work mit me."

"Is he a Dutchy?"

"No; he vos worse."

"Worse?"

"Ya—a—s."

"Worse than a Dutchy?"

"Ya—a—s; I vos sorry for mine friend. He vos mine cousin. He always goes round mit me."

"Eh, what's that you say? He ain't a Dutchy, and that he is your cousin?"

"Dot vos right. He ain't a Dutchy, needer vos I Dutchy."

"You ain't a Dutchy?"

"No."

"What are you?"

"I vos a German; I vos come from Berlin; I vos a brewer in der old country."

The men laughed; the innocence and genuine rusticity of the German was refreshing and amusing.

"Is your friend worse than a German?"

"Ya—a—s."

"How is that?"

"He vos deaf and dumb."

"What's his trade?"

"He vos a brewer."

"Where do you expect to get work?"

"In von of dem breweries."

"Who told you about any breweries up in this country?"

"I vos read aboud dem breweries in der papers."

The two men were very close to the secret location of one of the illicit stills at the moment.

"Who sent you in this direction?"

"A mans vot we vos met on der road."

"Why did you not come in the day-time?"

"The mans said it was better as we come at night."

"What is the name of the man who sent you here?"

"His name vos Richards."

Upon a former occasion our hero had met a man named Richards, who really was looking for two or three hands to work in one of the breweries.

The Dutchman had, during the conversation, got his hands down.

Suddenly one of the men remarked in a whisper:

"There's something wrong here."

"What's wrong?"

"That Dutchman says his friend is deaf and dumb, but do you remember the man's hands went up at the word of command?"

"By ginger! you are right!"

"Say, old man, you say your friend is deaf and dumb?"

"Ya—a—s."

"You lie!"

"Eh?"

"You lie!"

"By Jimminett! vy you vos tolle me dot I lie, eh?"

"Your friend heard me when I ordered him to throw up his hands."

"Eh! you t'ink so?"

"I do."

"Well, dot vos all right. I can not help it. I vos glad dot mine friend's hearing it vos come back."

"You saw him raise his hands?"

"Ya—a—s."

"Then why did you tell me he was deaf and dumb?"

"Because he vos deaf and dumb."

"How did he chance to hear me, then?"

"He vos not hear you."

"But his hands went up."

"Dot vos all right."

"How is it all right, old man?"

"Well, he vos no fool, of he vos deaf and dumb. He vos see me put up mine hands, and he vos do like. I vos do, and ven I puts mine hands down, den he vos put down his hands, oh? I vos show you how you vos talk mit a deaf and dumb man."

"Let's see you talk with him."

"It vos very dark, you vos not see good. I vos go mit you somewhere dot we hav light, den I vos show you."

One of the men said in a whisper:

"I think it a good idea to go somewhere and look at these men under a glare of light."

"If we go where there is light, you will show us how you talk with your friend?"

"Ya—a—s."

"Well, come along."

"Do vos how I talk!" exclaimed Black Raven; and with two bounds he and Bidwell leaped backward, and were covered by a clump of bushes.

The riders were not looking for any such movement, and at once they commenced blazing away, but there came an answering shot.

A regular fusillade followed.

The men closed in toward where the two men had taken refuge, but were speedily driven back.

A dreaded name was whispered in the midst of the surprised ambuscaders.

The men realized that they had been fooled. "It's Black Raven!" said one of their number.

The mere mention of Black Raven's name spread consternation in the ranks of the riders.

It was uncertain which man might go down, and it was certain that some of them would go down. If they pressed too close upon the trail of the terrible detective.

Meantime, our hero and his companion beat a retreat.

When at a safe distance, they came to a halt.

"That jig is up!" said Bidwell.

"You're right!"

"We had a narrow 'squeak.'"

"They had us dead."

"Your Dutch game was a good 'un."

"It pulled us out that time."

"Dang it, I'm sorry."

"Why sorry?"

"I should like to have got in on a satisfaction with those devils."

"Our time will come."

"What shall we do?"

"Come with me."

"Lead, I'll follow; I'm a homeless man now."

The detective's operations were over for that night, and he made his way to the rock castle.

When Bidwell was introduced into the detective's eyrie, he expressed his amazement, but our hero was silent; something had gone wrong.

"What's the matter?" asked Bidwell.

The detective did not make an immediate reply, but Chris and the dog, Tiger, were missing.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THERE was but one contingency under which Chris, the little "What is it?" was to leave the rock chamber.

Black Raven had been explicit in his directions; he had said:

"If you see the ghost, follow it and take the dog with you."

The little darky and the dog were both missing, and our hero's mind was excited.

"What has gone wrong, Raven?"

"Nothing has gone wrong, I reckon."

"You appear bothered."

"I am bothered."

"Has your refuge been trailed?"

"No."

"What's the matter?"

"I can not tell you now; we will know later on; meantime make yourself comfortable."

Our hero produced some eatables. As stated, he always had a supply of cold refreshments on hand; when his stock became exhausted he renewed it.

The two men ate and went to sleep. It was near daylight when they stretched out for repose.

Morning dawned, but Chris did not return; the detective began to grow uneasy, and his uneasiness increased when toward noon Tiger returned alone.

"Hello, old man, where have you been?"

The dog showed considerable restlessness.

"I wish that animal could talk," remarked Black Raven.

"I think he is talking pretty plainly," said Bidwell.

"How so?"

"Can't you study him?"

"Tell me what you think."

"He wants you to follow him."

"That's how I take it."

"There is no misunderstanding his signs, Raven."

The detective fed the dog, and said:

"You will remain here?"

"I'll go with you."

"No; stay here."

"What's your game?"

"I will go with the dog."

"You may need my help."

"If I do, I'll send the dog back."

"All right, old man; you know your own business."

"Come, Tiger, my good fellow, I'm with you."

Black Raven motioned toward the exit from the rock chamber, and the dog bounded forward.

"When will you return?"

"As soon as I can."

"If you are not here by sundown, I will start out to find you."

"All right."

The dog led the way, and the detective followed.

Black Raven was very uncomfortable. He feared some evil fortune had overtaken his little friend.

Later on his worst suspicions were confirmed. About a mile from the rock chamber the hound came to a halt and uttered the death-wail peculiar to his species.

Black Raven hurried forward, and found the good animal nosing a pool of blood.

"Good-bye, Chris!" was the exclamation that fell from his lips.

A moment later, however, a colder thrill went through his heart.

He had made a close examination, and near the pool of blood he found a light strand of human hair, long and silky. It was not wool, but hair.

"Alas! it is worse than I thought," were the words that fell from between his blue lips.

The dog gave signs that his quest was not over and the detective signaled the animal to proceed.

Half an hour passed when there came the report of a gun, and Tiger came bounding back to his master.

Black Raven took in the situation; the dog had been fired on, and a moment later two men appeared in sight.

They were the two roughest-looking specimens the detective had ever seen.

The two men at the same instant discovered our hero, and advanced toward him.

Black Raven calmly awaited their approach.

"Hello, stranger," called the men.

"Hello," responded the detective.

"You hang out around here?"

"Yes."

"What's your name?"

"None of your business."

"Hello, you're cocky, eh?"

"Yes."

"Well, talk civil or we will take all the snap out of you by snapping one of these little darnings in your eyes!"

The man flourished a pistol.

"Did you fire on my dog?"

"I just did."

"Why?"

"I took a notion."

"The dog didn't harm you?"

"We didn't harm the dog."

"What are you doing around here, anyhow?"

"We've a little business up this way."

"You have, eh?"

"Yes."

"You're starting in well, stranger."

"We've a free-and-easy style of doing business; we're devil-hunting."

"You look like devils yourselves."

"Do you mean that for a joke?"

"No; it's my opinion."

"I've a mind to teach you a lesson."

"Get to work, I'm ready to take lessons."

"You ain't worth it."

"Thank you."

"We're looking for Black Raven."

"You are, eh?"

"That's our mission."

"What do you want of Black Raven?"

"We're in the mountains to down him."

"Did he evr harm you?"

"We're after the price."

"Ah, the reward for the devil who will send him over!"

"That's the size of it."

"What will you give me if I will put you on Black Raven's track?"

"Do you know where he is lurking?"

"I reckon I do."
"I'll give you a fiver."
"Let's have your money."
"Show up your man first and the money will be 'blown in,'"
"You mean what you say, old man?"
"I do."
"I don't believe you've got five dollars."
"You're a sassy talker."
"I am."
"What are you traveling on, anyhow?"
"My reputation."
"Who are you?"

"They call me Black Raven around here."
As Black Raven spoke, he presented two revolvers, and exclaimed:
"Up with your hands, you scoundrels!"
He had both men covered, and their hands went up; the thing had come on them rather suddenly.

The detective had the first call.
"So you two cubs are looking for Black Raven, eh?"
The men were two reckless devils, and one of them, the fellow who had done all the previous talking, said:

"Not now."
"Ah, you've given over the search, eh?"
"No; we've found our man."
"What are you going to do about it?"
"You've got the call, stranger."
"I think I have."
"Dead sure."

Black Raven had no time to waste. He was a powerful man, and he was satisfied the two wretches were mere braggadocios.

Suddenly he sprung forward, and quick as a flash, he had downed both men with the butts of his weapons; as the men fell, he as quickly in turn kicked the weapons from the hands of both.

"Now, get up and chase!" he said.
The two men leaped to their feet and started.
Black Raven signaled Tiger. He wanted the dog to have his revenge, and he exclaimed:
"Sic 'em, Tiger!"

CHAPTER XXV.

This dog took the signal, and was evidently glad of an opportunity to secure his revenge. It's a mean dog that won't go for two mischievous wretches upon all occasions, and Tiger was a high-spirited animal.

Black Raven enjoyed the chase; Tiger chawed lots of bad wool snatched out of the seats of the trousers of the two rascals who had come into the mountains to find Black Raven, and who really succeeded in their quest.

Tiger just had a high old racket on them. He went for one and then the other, and gave them a long race.

At length the dog came running back, and, unquestionably, if he could have expressed in words his delight, he would have said:

"That was just gay, colonel, the best sport I've had in a dog's age!"

The detective started the animal once more on a trail, and followed the dog for over an hour.

The animal led the way straight to a distillery, and Black Raven made up his mind that a denouement was at hand.

The detective stopped a moment to decide upon his course. He had trained his animal to lay low when necessary.

A survey revealed the fact that there were several men around the distillery, regular workmen.

A transform followed, and in a few moments a tramp appeared in place of the athletic-looking terror, a regular old miserable, wretched-looking tramp.

Black Raven sneaked into the distillery, found his way to the receiving tierce, seized a cup that lay upon a cross board, and a moment later heard approaching steps.

One of the workmen came along and found an old tramp lying seemingly helplessly drunk beside the receiving tierce.

"Hello!" he exclaimed, "what have we here?"

The man's exclamation attracted several other workmen, and they were grouped around the sleeping tramp.

One of the men gave the old fellow a kick, and he opened his eyes, and uttered a growl.

"Hello, old man, what are you doing here?"
"Sleeping," came the answer.
"Where did you come from?"
"I don't know."

"Where are you bound?"
"Nowhere."
"Did you ever see the old 'cuss' before?" asked one of the men.

All hands protested they had never seen him before.

"Get out of here."
"G'long; can't you let a feller rest after an all-night tramp?"

"You can't rest here; you've been drinking some of the high wine."

"So would you drink if you saw what I did down in the gulch?"

"What did you see down in the gulch?"
"Three dead men."

"You saw three dead men?"

"Yes."

"What was the matter with them?" came the unmeaning question.

"Nothing was the matter with them; they were dead."

"How did it happen?"
"There's been a fight down there, I reckon." The gulch was about two miles away.

"Are you lying?" demanded one of the men.

"Why should I lie?"

The detective all the time was carrying out the play of a half-drunk man suddenly awakened out of a sleep.

"You've been dreaming."

"If you think I've been dreaming, go down to the gulch!"

"How long ago did you see the bodies?"

"This morning."

"What time?"

"Two hours ago."

"Did you know the men?"

"No."

"Were they armed?"

"No."

"How long had they been dead?"

"Can't tell."

Four of the men determined to go down to the gulch to verify the old man's story.

"Will you come along with us and show us where the bodies lay?"

"Of course I will."

"Come along."

The tramp was assisted to his feet, but fell headlong upon his face. He scrambled around trying to get up again, but was unable to rise.

One of the men said:

"He's no good; we can go without him."

"Hold on," said the old man, "I'll go; I'm only a little weak."

"Go on without him; maybe there has been scrummage," said another of the men.

The four men started to go to the gulch.

The tramp fell asleep again just where he had fallen.

Black Raven had played his part well.

He waited until the four men had time to get about a quarter of a mile away, when he rose to his feet. He staggered around the building until he came upon one of the men. He gave the fellow a rap on the head which upset him, and in a moment the man was tied.

The fellow screamed and called for help, and the other two men came running to the spot.

The old tramp had suddenly become sobered up. He fell upon the other two men, and soon had them disabled and bound hand and foot.

When the three men lay helpless before him the detective dropped all signs of drunkenness, and asked:

"Where is the little darky?"

"What little darky?"

"Come, come, don't attempt to fool me or waste time! You fellows have a little darky a pri-ovet here, and I want to know where he is!"

"Who are you, anyhow?"

"Never mind, where is the lad?"

"There's no lad here."

"You swear it?"

"Yes, I swear it."

Black Raven was a powerful man, one of the most powerful men in the mountains. He raised one of the workmen in his arms and carried him to a big vat filled with water.

The man was tied, and could not make a struggle.

"What are you going to do with me?"

"Drown you."

"Drown me?"

"Yes, in cold blood, or rather water, old man; you've lied to me, and I'm going to drown you, sure!"

"You're foolin'!"

"No, I ain't fooling."

"You won't drown me?"

"Yes, I will."

"You dare not."
"You will see."
The detective had reached the side of the vat with his victim.

The man began to fear that his strange and remarkable captor was in earnest.

"Hold on, don't kill me!"

"In you go!"

"Who are you?"

"Black Raven!"

The man turned pale.
He had, up to the moment, believed it was all a joke, or intended for a scare, but upon the mention of that terrible name he was filled with terror.

"The darky is here," he said.

"Ah I thought so! Who brought him here?"

"Some of the men."

"Where is he?"

"He is save."

"Where?"

"In the vault."

"Will you lead me to the vault?"

"Release me and I will."

Our hero released the cords which bound the man.

The fellow led the way to a little vault-like looking place in the rear of the main building; a key was hanging on the outside.

"He is in there."

"Open the door."

The man opened the door.

Black Raven uttered a signal whistle, and an instant later little Chris came leaping out, exclaiming:

"I'se on deck agin, colonel!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

BLACK RAVEN was delighted to see the little darky alive and kicking once more.

"I spected yer, colonel."

"You did, eh?"

"Yes, squire."

"Well, I am here, Chris."

"Golly, I'se a heap to tell yer, boss!"

"That's all right, but wait; I've a little business on hand."

The detective shoved the man into the vault.

"Go you there!" he said, and he closed and locked the door.

"Follow me, Chris," he said.

"I'se wid yer every time."

The detective entered the distillery and carried out the two bound men. He told them of the man in the vault, and then, still followed by Chris, entered the building.

"What yer bout' ter do, colonel?"

"Set fire to this place."

"Golly, dat am de ticket! I'se wid yer dar, and den I'se a heap ter tell. I seed de ghost! Yes, sah; I seed de ghost, shuhah!"

Black Raven did not have much time to spare, and a few moments later the flames were at work.

Passing from the building our hero went to the men, and said:

"I've a message to leave."

The men remained silent.

"Tell your bosses Black Raven is ready to close in!" Good-day."

Chris put in, and said:

"Tell yer bosses dat Chris Wonder am wid de colonel on de job! Good-day."

Our hero and the little "What Is It?" made tracks.

On the way Chris attempted to tell his tale, but the detective bade him wait. They reached a bluff from whence they could see the burning building.

Black Raven remained to satisfy himself that it would be really destroyed.

Meantime the four men had gone on to the gulch, and had visited the spot where the tramp had said he had seen the dead bodies.

There were no bodies there, neither were there any signs of a scrimmage having taken place.

"Well, I'll be hang'd!" exclaimed one of the men, "this is good!"

"What's your idea?" came the question.

"We have been fooled."

"By the tramp?"

"Yes."

"What could have been his game?"

"That is the question. We had better hasten back and ascertain."

The men turned to retrace their steps. They had gone but a short distance, when one of them suddenly exclaimed:

"Look there!"

The men did look, and an ominous sight met their gaze.

"That is a fire," said one.
"A fire, sure!"
"It is in the direction of the distillery!"
"It is the distillery, sure!"
Oaths and curses fell from the lips of the maddened men; they did not give expression to their suspicions, but hastened along toward the building.

A short time later and they came in sight of the already smoldering ruins.

The building had been a frame one and very old, and it had burned like a tinder box.

The men did howl—howl like so many enraged tigers.

They ran forward and found their companions and speedily unbound them.

"What does this mean?" came the question.

"The building was fired!" came the response.

"By whom?"
"The tramp!"
"And the tramp?"
"Was Black Raven?"
"Where is he?"
"Gone!"
"Where is the little darky?"
"Gone!"
"Ah, it was he made the trouble!"

The men were still talking over matters when a party of horsemen approached.

The latter came over toward the group of workmen.

"What has been going on here?"
The men dared not tell the truth.

"The building took fire from the boiler room."
"You had a prisoner here, where is he?"
"Gone!"
"Who let him go?"
"He escaped."

A wrangle followed, but with it we have nothing to do.

When fully satisfied that there was no hope for the group of buildings, Black Raven said:

"Come on, Chris."
"Dat am shuah work dar, colonel."
"Yes, Chris."
"We did it well, sab."
"Very well."
"I'se a tale ter tell yor, colonel."
"Wait until we reach the castle."
"Yer don't seem anxious to hear what I'se got ter tell yer!"
"Not now."
"Does yer understand dat I seed de ghost ob Miss Alvia, de French gal?"
"Wait until we reach the castle."
"What am dat, sah?" suddenly demanded Chris.

The detective at the same instant had discerned the sound of many voices.

"The riders are abroad, Chris."
"Dey am on de road, sah. Golly! ges dat we had better take ter der woods."
"We will wait and see."

The detective and his companion hid in the bushes beside the road, and a few moments later saw at least twenty riders go by.

The detective and his companion were not ten feet distant from the band of horsemen as they passed.

A strange dialogue fell upon the detective's ear.

"There is no question but the girl is insane!" said one of the men.

"That's my idea; but Andy the Mex claims differently; anyhow he has asked to have her transferred over to his keeping."

They were but a few passing words, but those words told a fearful tale to the listening detective.

Even the little darky appeared to catch their suggestiveness and significance, as he said:

"Golly, colonel, who wer dey talkin' 'bout?"
"Whom do you think, Chris?"
"I'se an ide, son."
"What is your idea?"
"Did yer hear plain what they said?"
"Yes."
"Yer am shuah?"
"Yes."
"I jes' heerd dis yer, 'Dar am no doubt but we gal am insane.'"
"That is what I heard."
"Den dat am no use speculatin' as to de gal dey wer talkin' 'bout."
"Alvia?"
"De French gal, shuah, colonel."
"So I fear."
"Does yer know the man called Andy the Mex?"
"Yes."

"Am be a bad fellow, colonel?"
"He is a very bad man."
"Dis yere am bad business. Golly, I'se sorry, but I can't tell how de missy got into de possession ob dem yere scoundrels."
"You saw her yesterday, eh?"
"Last night, sah, shuah."
"And you followed her?"
"Yes, sah, and dat is why I can't understand how she am got into de possession ob de riders."
"Did you manage to speak to the girl?"
"Yes, sah. I spoke to her, but dat ain't de whole ob de story."
"What is the real truth?"
"Well, I jes' spoke to her, colonel, but she did not speak ter me."
"What did you say to her, Chris?"
"I jes' tol' her to hole on, dat I were gwine to gib her some news, but she appeared to be in a hurry! Golly, an awful hurry, 'cause I were lookin' at her one minute, and de next she wer gone, bag and baggage, boss, gone mighty mysterious."

CHAPTER XXVII.

"TELL me all about it, Chris."
"Dat am jes' what I'se been tryin' ter do, colonel, but yer said 'Hole on 'all de time!'"
"Well, now I tell you to go ahead, as it may be necessary to strike upon the trail of that gang of riders."
"Gee dar ain't no use follerin' dem fellers; dey ain't de gang dat dis yere chile had de trouble wid."
"Give me your story."
"Well, yer see, yer tol' dis yere chile ter lay dat and look out fer de ghost, and I tell yer, colonel, I jes' did lay dar. I wer layin' fast asleep when dat yere dog Tiger he jes' kicked up a rumpus, and I jes' woke up and foun' de animal raisin' de debil wid hee antic. Says I, 'What's de matter, ole man?' and he jes' stuck his nose out ob de winder ob dat yere rock cassel, and he jes' acted strange like. Den I jes' takes a peep out, and dar I saw de ghost. I know'd her at once, and it wer de French gal, Miss Alvia, shuah! 'Come on, Tiger,' says I, and down we goes, and when I gets down in de ravine dar wer de ghost, and I goes fer her; but, golly! she went out ob sight like a shadow!"

"Did you follow her?"
"Did I follow her? Yer kin jes' bet I did, Jes' look yer!"

The little darky went down into his pocket, and brought out a clawed piece of wool.

"Where did that come from?"

"Dat's what Tiger dar jerked off de young lady's wardrobe."

"The dog overtook her, eh?"

"Yer kin jes' bet he did, and dat vere bit ob de ches settle de ghost question. Ghosts, yer know, colonel, don't war no hand-made clothes, dat am shuah."

"Did you come up with her?"

"No, sah; de dog he comes back wid de wool, but when dis yere chile wer gwine fer de gal, he suddenly gets a rifle run down under dis yer nose; yer see, jes' bout de time de dog catches de gal, a gang ob dem yere mooner debbil, dey come down, and politely ask ole Tiger to 'moozey,' and de dog 'moozed!'"

"Is that all you know about it?"

"No, sah; dis yere chile war made prisoner, and de teller what made dis yere chile prisoner jes' takes ober in der ravine and dor I seed a sight dat jes' made dis yere chile's blood run cold; de men wer drunk; dey had der lubly Miss Alvia a prisoner; der girl tried to struggle ter get free, and one ob de men struck her, and down she fell, and I jes' t'ought she wer dead, shuah!"

Black Raven's blood ran cold, and a terrible gleam shone in his eyes. It was an awful picture to have presented to his mind—the striking down of one so young and beautiful and helpless.

"Did they kill her, Chris?"

"No, sah."

"How do you know?"

"Well, yer see de man dat knocked her down, wer knocked down himself by one ob der wider men, and de gal wer brought round; but it wer a bad blow dat she received; and, golly! she may be dead afore dis yer time; it war an awful sight, colonel; I'se seen a good many men knocked over but dat were de awfulest sight dat I eber did see!"

"What became of the poor girl?"

"She wer taken away by a couple ob der

men and der rest ob de gang took dis yere chile and put him jes' whar yer loun' him."

"We must find that girl, Chris."

"I'se wid yer, colonel. I'se a little reckonin' wid one ob dem yere fellers, 'cause I jes' got a thump on der head wid one ob dem yere pistols cause I said something."

"They rapped you, eh?"

"Yes, sah."

"Did you show fight, Chris?"

"Well, yer see, it wern't policy, colonel, der wer too many ob dem yere fellers, so I jes' made up my mind dat I'se gwine ter wait till you and I got de 'wood' on 'em, den we'd git it to 'em."

Black Raven and Chris once more struck the road and made their way to the rock chamber.

Upon the following morning the detective started out alone to strike a trail. He took Tiger with him.

The hound upon the previous day had set him upon the trail of the little "What Is It," but our hero, upon the succeeding occasion, started him upon the trail of the unfortunate French girl.

It was a long time before the animal fastened upon a scent, but at length he started off, but he appeared to be baffled to hold the trail.

Black Raven followed in different directions until night fell, and it was ten o'clock when he found himself in the vicinity of the spot where the villa of M. Aunial had once stood.

A mass of charred and blackened ruins marked the spot where the once handsome residence had stood.

Black Raven had made his way into the deserted garden surrounding the ruins, and found a rustic seat upon which he had once sat with the lovely Alvia. He sat down awhile to rest, and his dog crouched at his feet.

Our hero had his eyes fixed upon the ruins, when he observed something moving in the midst of the blackened beams.

"Hello, I'm not alone around here!" he muttered, and he rose from his seat and crept upon the ground behind, where he lay hidden.

The scene was lighted under the radiance of the stars, it being a wonderfully clear night.

Our hero lay and watched for a long time. He felt assured that he had not been deceived. He was certain he had seen a figure moving in the midst of the ruins.

A few moments passed and his original suspicion was confirmed. He saw the figure of a man plainly revealed.

Black Raven crept forward nearer to the ruins, and soon assured himself that the man was searching for something.

After an hour's watching the detective saw the man start to go away.

"I must speak with that fellow!" muttered the watcher, and he made a noise.

The man had stepped from amidst the ruins, and was moving away, when his steps were arrested by hearing the noise.

A moment he stood in a listening attitude.

Black Raven was in a new disguise, one in which he had never been seen to be recognized by any of the inmates.

The man appeared to conclude that he had been deceived and started on again, when once more Black Raven made a noise.

The detective desired to have the man advance toward the spot where he and his dog lay concealed.

The man muttered aloud.

"Hang it! I heard a noise," he said.

Our hero recognized the man's voice; it was Andy the Mex.

It was Black Raven's turn to mutter upon recognizing the man, and he soliloquized.

"I wonder what the scoundrel is doing here?"

Andy the Mex began to "mousie" around evidently looking to discover the source of the noise.

Black Raven, however, still "lay low." He was not prepared to disclose himself.

Andy the Mex appeared to be greatly puzzled, but a third time started to move away when a third time he was arrested by hearing a noise.

The man drew his pistols.

The noise coming every time just as he started to move away was suggestive of some design.

The fellow listened a moment, and then demanded:

"Is any one here?"

The detective remained silent.

Again came the question.

"Is any one here?"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

BLACK RAVEN decided to face his man, and rising from his place of concealment he advanced with pistols drawn and demanded:

"What are you doing here?"

"Aha! who asks the question?"

"One question at a time."

The man laughed, and answered:

"You talk loud!"

"Do I?"

"Yes."

"So have it, Andy, but you have a motive when you go searching through these ruins."

The man's laugh was changed into an ejaculation of surprise.

"Eh, Black Raven!" he exclaimed.

"At your service!"

"You seek me?"

"No, I fall upon you."

"I've no quarrel with you, Raven."

"I hate with you!"

"Why do you seek me? you overcame me once."

"Twice, I thought, however, that I had wiped you out, but you appear to have as many lives as a cat!"

"I escaped, as it were, by a miracle; the adventure proved a warning to me; I've been a different man ever since—I've reformed."

"Oh, you have?"

"I have."

"I am glad, for now, as a reformed man, you will have no objection to telling me what you were doing searching around those ruins?"

"I am willing to tell you."

"Proceed."

"I've seen a ghost, or else the French girl escaped from this building upon the night of the fire."

"How could she escape?"

"That is the mystery I am trying to solve, that is why I have been searching around the ruins."

"What interest have you in the girl dead or alive?"

"None whatever."

"Then why are you searching here?"

"Merely to solve the mystery."

"Have you succeeded?"

"No."

"When did you see the ghost?"

"I've seen it upon several occasions."

"Do you believe it to be a ghost?"

"No."

"Have you any theory to account for her escape from the fire?"

"No."

"Your men remained here the night of the fire until the house was consumed?"

"Yes."

"And you are unable to arrive at any solution of the mystery?"

"I am."

"Do you remember, Andy, that there is an unsettled account between you and me?"

"All accounts are settled."

"No, sir; I have taken an oath to have you live!"

"Why did you swear to have my life?"

"Monsieur Aumal and his daughter were my close friends."

"Still, why should you swear to have my life?"

"I look upon you as their murderer!"

"They are not dead!"

"How do you know?"

"I have seen the daughter."

"Have you spoken to her?"

"No."

"The daughter may be living through some unaccountable incident, but the father is still your victim!"

"If one escaped, all escaped."

"Have you seen any other member of the family?"

"No."

"You are sure you saw the girl?"

"Yes."

"When did you last see her?"

"Two nights ago."

"And you think it is the living Alvia?"

"I am sure."

"You think if one escaped the fire, all did?"

"I do."

"Then you must have some theory as to how they escaped?"

"I have not; I am seeking for an explanation."

"I am satisfied that they are dead, and we will settle."

"You would murder me?"

"You shall have a chance for your life."

"I do not desire a combat with you."

"There is no escape for you."

"Suppose I am guiltless?"

"You are not guiltless."

"I am! I saw the girl; she still lives. If she lives, all live!"

"We may meet again, Andy, and when we do, it's your life or mine, unless—"

The detective stopped.

"Unless what?"

"Unless in the meantime you produce the girl."

"Will you give me that chance?"

"I will."

"The girl lives, and I will find her. I accept your condition."

"You will prepare to die unless you find her?"

"I will."

"Good enough; go your way!"

"One word more," said Andy the Mex.

"Speak on."

"Did Monsieur Aumal ever speak of me to you?"

"Why should he speak of you?"

"It appears to be a settled conviction in your mind that I sought his life."

"We will not talk about that now—go!"

The detective was not deceived. He was playing a part all the time. He had obtained from Chris a description of the gang that had made a prisoner of the ghost, and a certain suspicion had been running through his mind ever since.

Andy the Mex appeared anxious to prolong the conversation, but Black Raven would not permit him to say more.

The man slunk away.

During the talk our hero's dog had several times scented around Andy the Mex, and the detective was glad of the fact. He had formed a certain design which he proposed to carry out.

Black Raven waited until Andy had passed from sight, when he started the dog into the ruins.

For two hours dog and master wandered amidst the charred remains of the villa, but no result came of their search until, just as the detective had concluded to desist, the animal gave a certain signal.

The dog had left the ruins and had wandered off some distance with his snout to the ground.

The detective ran to where the dog stood crouched before some object which, upon examination, proved to be a lady's slipper.

Black Raven closely examined the little foot-covering, and it told a suggestive tale.

Two or three facts were satisfactorily established by the unerring instinct and wonderful observational powers of the detective.

In the first place he knew that the slipper had once belonged to Alvia Aumal; but what was still more remarkable, was the fact that the slipper had been worn within four-and-twenty hours by its owner.

The detective gazed at the curious memento with a strange and puzzled look upon his face.

"What does it all mean?" he muttered.

The ghost had been wandering around the mountains in sunshine and rain for several days; had she worn the shoe during all her wanderings it would have shown more evidences of having been worn; but the slipper that the detective held in his hand was hardly more than soiled, not worn at all.

"This does get me!" muttered Black Raven; "this is one of the greatest mysteries of my whole career!"

There was another remarkable fact connected with the finding of the slipper. Alvia, if little Chris had told the truth, had been a prisoner at the moment the slipper was dropped from its wearer's foot!"

Black Raven stood for a long time lost in deep contemplation. He had encountered many mysteries during his career as a detective, but the finding of the little slipper, as stated, was suggestive of the greatest mystery of his whole life.

After a season he said:

"I will just continue this search. I may solve this mystery right now and here!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

BLACK RAVEN set Tiger afoot to trail. The intelligent animal burrowed around in every direction, but did not succeed in making any discoveries. It

seemed as though the mysterious little slipper had dropped from the skies.

The detective also engaged in the search, and at length a shining little object attracted his attention. He picked up the glistening, and found it to be a jeweled ring, and the remarkable coincidence connected with the latter discovery was the fact that he had seen the ring upon Alvia's finger; indeed, he remembered that it gleamed there upon the fatal night when she burst from his grasp and returned to rush headlong into her father's blazing home.

Again the detective muttered,

"Well, this does get me! It is evident, beyond any peradventure, that the lovely girl did not perish in the flames."

A former suspicion of our hero was fully confirmed. Alvia's reason had been destroyed by the horrors of that night, and the fair ghost was the beautiful girl, roaming around a helpless maniac.

How she had escaped the raging flames was a deep mystery; and again, what had become of her father and the other inmates of the house? No human remains had been found after the fire. Little Chris had made a search upon the morning succeeding the conflagration, as had others also, but no signs of the supposed perished parties were found.

The detective put the ring into his pocket, and to himself he muttered,

"Now, I will follow that scoundrel, Andy the Mex, that villain, that had a purpose in hunting around this ruin. He was seeking to solve some mystery, but the chances are that he and I started from different starting-points."

The dog was put on the track of the fellow Sarto.

The trail was fresh, and the animal took to the scent at a jump.

Our hero followed on, and it was well into the night when the animal scented to a house standing solitary and alone like a ruin upon a deserted mountain peak.

There was a light in the house. Black Raven moved forward with great caution and soon got under one of the windows, when he glanced in.

A sight met his gaze that thrilled him through and through; there were at least a dozen men in the room, and lying around were a number of masks; the fellows were evidently holding a council of war.

Some of the men the detective readily recognized; the balance were strangers to him; they were bad lot, a group of desperate characters.

Andy the Mex was in their midst. Tiger had to follow a sure trail.

The position of our hero was a perilous one; discovery meant a fight, and a fight under the circumstances would have occurred with all the chances against him, and yet he did not steal away, but determined to remain and brave all the perils. Indeed, he would take greater chances.

He walked round the house, and at the opposite end found a window opening into what appeared to be a bedroom.

Black Raven tested the fastenings and learned that he could force an entrance.

A moment he stood and considered.

The question arose, Did the game warrant the risk? There was no need for him to run into needless peril. If there were anything to be gained, he would not hesitate a moment; but the question presented was, Would he gain anything by forcing an entrance?

A startling incident decided him upon his course; suddenly the stillness that pervaded was broken by a wild, heart-rending shriek.

The cry decided the detective.

He quietly removed his boots, studied the condition of his pistols, and felt mechanically the handle of his knife.

All were right.

There came but the one wild cry, and all was still again.

Black Raven always moved with the utmost caution and coolness. He unfastened the catches, and a moment later with a light spring leaped into the room.

All was dark and still.

The detective had studied his bearings from the outside; a hallway ran through the center of the house, and on the opposite side of the hall was the room in which the twelve riders were gathered.

Our hero passed to the half and groped his way to the door of the room, when he knelt at the keyhole and listened.

A more risky chance a man never took.

In that district the hand of every man engaged in unlawful business was turned against

him; within a radius of twenty miles there dwelt five hundred men who at sight would have shot down Black Raven as they would have stamped upon a fugitive rat.

The detective fully realized all the chances against him.

As he knelt beside the door he heard voices within. Andy the Mex was addressing the assembled riders. He said:

"We have but one alternative: We must stop all business and turn our whole attention to the downing of this man Raven. He is a perfect devil in our midst; the Yelson distillery is a heap of ruins, Pleasanton and Weldon are in jail in Savannah, and that fellow is prowling around in our midst like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour!"

"Your advice is all right, Sarto," returned one of the men, "but what are we to do?"

"We must make a business of running him down."

"I think we have made a business of running him down. We have found him several times, and every time he has come out ahead. Two nights ago twenty men had him pinned in a shanty, and what came of it? Four of the twenty men were killed; and when Black Raven took a notion he quietly stole away, and within ten hours had set fire to one of the most valuable properties in the district!"

One of the men whom our hero had not recognized spoke up and said:

"It's a mystery to me that one man can defy thousands!"

"You don't know the man!"

"I should like to know him!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I should like to meet him and take chances in a fair stand-up match with him!"

"Would you do it if you met him?"

"Yes, I would."

"He'd down you! Black Raven can get away with any one man who walks the lands of this State. He is a very devil, and that is no exaggeration!"

"He has terrorized you fellows, and you stand no show with him on that account!"

One of the men now said:

"We have a prisoner, boys, what shall we do with him?"

"Try him!" came the response.

"And hang him!" put in another man.

"Who is the man?" asked one of the strangers.

"He's a man who has been lecturing against our gang right along. He has been seeking to arouse the people hereabouts to rise up and wipe us all out!"

"Is he a Government spy?"

"No; he's a half-breed — sort of missionary among the colored population round here."

"Where did you catch him?"

"We caught him spying around one of our distilleries. He is probably in league with Raven, and gives him all the information he gathers."

"Aha!" was the whispered ejaculation of our hero.

The latter understood at once who the prisoner was, and recognized from what quarter the wild shriek had come.

The discovery was an intimation that he must do or die.

CHAPTER XXX.

This prisoner was a man who really had been of great service to the detective. He was an educated mulatto, an enthusiast in behalf of the future of his own race. He was not a physically brave fellow, but he was a loyal chap on the side of law and order, and was well liked by the better class of people, white and black, in the district.

The man had long been an object of suspicion to the riders, and they had several times threatened his life.

Gabriel Hazen, although lacking real courage, never paid any heed to the threats against his life, and he had sped around, and, as stated, time and again had furnished the detective with some very valuable information.

As it appeared, he had at length been gobbled up, and the riders were determined to execute their oft-repeated threats.

As the man had really been a sort of aid to the detective, the latter felt bound to save him at all hazards, and yet it was a tough job he had before him.

These men discussed the subject of the man's

execution, and the detective stood at the door, a listener to the life-and-death discussion.

One or two of the riders were opposed to killing the man. One of them said:

"I am against killing Hazen. Public opinion will pronounce it a cold-blooded murder, and malters will become very hot for us!"

"Scrimmages have been going on every day," suggested one man.

"That is so, but a scrimmage is a scrimmage; and a fight where a dozen men were killed would not excite half the comment that will follow the laying cold of this fellow Hazen."

"He can be missing?"

"It's risky business, 'pards!'"

"We've been running risky business lately."

"That's so, but the game is going against us; our only chance now is to let matters quiet down."

"We will settle with Hazen and then quiet down if you like."

One of the strangers put in and said:

"Mebbe the fellow is not worth the game."

"He's a dangerous man."

"Down him, down him! What's the use of bothering?" said several in chorus.

Black Raven came to the conclusion that it was time to act. He stole forth from the house by the same route as he had entered. Once outside he ran off a hundred yards and discharged several barrels of one of his revolvers.

The result he had anticipated followed.

The men came rushing from the house.

Black Raven crept further away and let fly a second fusillade. He then ran round, and in an entirely different direction blazed away again. The men came forth from the house, all but two of them; the two remained to stand guard over the prisoner.

The riders scattered and began a little reconnaissance.

Black Raven ran further away and banged, banged with a pair of pistols as though two men were exchanging shots.

The riders commenced a studied search, and our hero thus far had successfully carried out his game.

The riders believed a scrimmage was going on; they were amazed to find that their retreat had been discovered, and determined to make short work of any spies.

The man Hazen had been caught while spying around, and it was because of his discovery they had decreed his death.

Having dispersed the men from the house, Raven doubled on his tracks and approached it. He ran straight into the house.

The men who had been left in charge of Hazen at the first fire had extinguished the lights.

As Raven entered, supposing him to be one of their own men returned, one of the guards asked him:

"What does it all mean?"

The detective's reply was a blow which felled the man to the ground, and a second blow felled his companion.

The whole incident occurred within a few seconds.

When Black Raven struck his men, he hit hard, and for a time the men were stunned. He intended they should be.

Having upset the men, he called:

"Hazen, where are you?"

There came no answer to his inquiry.

"Hello! have they already murdered him?" he ejaculated.

The detective commenced feeling around, and soon felt a human form, and the one touch told him it was a living body.

The truth flushed upon his mind; the prisoner was gagged.

Black Raven removed the gag and cut the thongs which bound the man, when the latter uttered an unearthly yell.

The poor fellow thought the moment of doom had arrived.

"Hush!" whispered our hero. But the man only yelled the louder, and, leaping to his feet, attempted to run away.

His cries had attracted the attention of some of the gang, who started to return to the house.

"Hang you for a fool, man!" whispered our hero in the terrified mulatto's ear. "You have ruined us both! I came to save you!"

"Who are you?"

"Black Raven."

"Thank Heaven!"

"I fear it's too late. You have alarmed the gang."

"Let's fly!"

"We have no wings. We'll have to let fly!" returned Black Raven, in a grim tone, as he clasped his revolvers.

Our hero told the truth. He was compelled to let fly.

Three or four of the riders came rushing into the room. At the same instant the two he had felled to the ground revived and leaped to their feet.

Black Raven always carried a club—a regular locust, a living terror at close quarters in a dark room. He readjusted his pistols and resorted to the use of the club, and there followed a lively time.

A trained man is indeed a power when armed with a club, under all the circumstances.

The detective did move around just lively, and in a few seconds had a heap of struggling, writhing riders sprawling upon the floor.

"Now come," he said to Hazen.

The latter had stood motionless and mute while the detective was actively engaged.

Our hero led the man across the hall to the window by which the original entrance had been effected.

"Leap out," he said.

The man obeyed, and Black Raven followed. The two ran toward the thicket, as the balance of the riders ran in at the front entrance.

The men as they ran in fell over their companions, and a struggle ensued; in the darkness the men mistook each other for foes.

Pandemonium reigned for a few minutes; the men writhed and struggled and cursed, but it was not long before they began to recognize one another's voices, and the combat ceased.

Lights were procured and peace reigned, but it was a ludicrous sight presented at the moment.

Andy the Mex had not had a hand in the fight. He came in last, just as the light was procured.

"What's the row?" he asked.

"That's just what we are trying to find out, old man."

"Where is your prisoner?"

"Gone!"

"Gone where?"

"We will have to wait for further information to enlighten you."

"Who freed him?"

"Well, that we don't know."

"Who's been here?"

One of the men answered:

"I should say the devil, or Black Raven!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

The devil and Black Raven were equal terrors to those baffled men.

They all came to the conclusion that it was Black Raven who had been in their midst.

They felt foolish enough. It was simply a matter of extreme wonder, the manner in which that extraordinary man played with them.

He always appeared to be on hand at a critical moment, and he always managed to come out ahead.

"Who did the outside firing?" came the question.

"You can easily make up your mind on that point," said Andy the Mex. "The shooting was a 'blind' to draw you fellows from the house."

"I reckon you were drawn in the same lottery," came the retort.

"We can hunt that man down yet," said a voice.

The speaker was the man who had early in the evening boasted a desire to meet Black Raven face to face. He had been one of the guards over the prisoner, and Andy the Mex said:

"I reckon you have had a down already."

"Curse him, I wish I had known it was that fellow."

"What would you have done?"

"I would have dropped him."

"You ought to desire revenge for the thump he gave you," suggested Andy the Mex.

"I do."

"You should seek it."

"I will."

"Go for him, old man, he is not far off, and you are sure to run across him before daylight."

The men all laughed.

The idea of one man attempting to down Black Raven was really amusing to these men who had enjoyed so many "bouts" with the redoubtable detective.

"I will find him some day!"

"Look out that he don't find you!"

Black Raven and Hazen had taken to "cover;" when once at a safe distance, the detective asked:

"How did you chance to fall into the hands of those fellows?"

"I was spotting that house."

"How did you chance to run on that house?"

"I thought the young lady was hidden there."

"What young lady?"

"I don't know, but the riders have a young lady a prisoner in their possession."

"How do you know?"

"One of my friends saw her in their company."

"Did you make any discoveries?"

"No."

"You saw nothing of her?"

"No."

"You conclude she is not there?"

"I can not tell, as I was gobblin before I had a chance to make an investigation."

"What led you to suspect the presence of the girl in that house?"

"They were moving in that direction when my friend saw them with the girl."

"Have you any idea as to the identity of the girl?"

"No."

Black Raven began to think that there was a possibility that Alvia might be a prisoner in that house, after all.

"You heard those men talk?"

"Yes."

"Did they drop anything that would lead you to suspect the presence of another prisoner besides yourself?"

"No; they were too busy in deciding as to what they should do with me."

"They reached a decision in your case?"

"Yes. They would have settled me if you had not arrived in time."

"It was lucky I got there, or you would have been dangling by this time."

"I am so thankful you came."

"You are a marked man now."

"I am."

"What will you do, Hazen?"

"What can I do?"

"Will it be safe for you to remain around here?"

"I think not."

"You will not leave these parts?"

"No."

"You will remain?"

"Yes."

"In spite of the peril?"

"Yes."

"You surprise me."

"Why?"

"You are such a coward."

"I am a coward, but I shall remain all the same; but hark ye, they will never catch me again. I will be on my guard in the future."

The detective determined to return and keep a watch on the house, and make a thorough investigation as to the presence of the lovely but unfortunate French girl there.

"You remain here with the dog," he said.

"The dog will not remain with me."

"The dog will not let you go!" came the reply.

Black Raven returned to the house. Fortune appeared to favor his design. He saw the riuers about to depart.

The detective counted the number who were going away, and discovered that three remained.

The remaining of three of the men in the house was suggestive. Why should they stay behind unless to watch?

Andy the Mex was among those who went away.

Black Raven waited until the men were at a safe distance, when he once more advanced toward the house.

He glanced in at the window and saw a sight that convinced him that the three men were not anticipating his return.

They had drawn out a table and produced a pack of cards, and were about to seat themselves down to a little comfortable game of draw.

"Now I will have some fun!" was the detective's quiet comment.

Black Raven felt that he needed a little recreation. He had mingled in so many tragedies he really desired to take a hand in a little comedy.

Well, a comedy did follow, but the comedy turned into a thrilling drama, and in the end there came a tragedy.

Black Raven at all times was prepared for this. He held in reserve the wonderful disguise and he determined to work it

There was no actual need for him to go under cover, but the man had set out to have some fun.

Meantime, the three riders were having a quiet little game; they were fully absorbed in the play, when they were aroused by a rap at the door.

The men leaped to their feet and drew their revolvers. One of them called out:

"Who's there?"

"Kin I cum in, gemmen?"

The men looked into one another's faces a moment, and one said:

"Let him in; it may lead to something."

The man little dreamed at the moment that the entrance of the knocker would really lead to something very serious for all hands.

"Come in."

An old, very old, darky shuffled into the room.

"He lo, you old gimerack, where did you come from?"

"I jes' cum from ober dar."

"What do you want?"

"I'se lookin' for n gemman."

"You're looking for a *gemman*?"

"Yes, sah."

"Who are you looking for?"

"Don't know ne *gemman*'s name, but I know de *gemman* when I see him."

"What do you want to see him about?"

"Portant business, jes' portant business," answered the old darky, and he shook his head in an important manner.

"How is it that you want to see a gentleman on important business and don't know his name?"

"Well, de *gemman* didn't tell dis yere chile he's name. He jes' said cum ober when yer get anyting ter tell me."

"Have you something to tell him?"

"Yes, something wery portant. Golly, but it am bery portant."

The three men were not without suspicion. Black Raven had played so many tricks upon them, they were looking for him under any guise.

CHAPTER XXXII.

These men were well posted as to Black Raven's facility for working disguises. One of the three was a smart man, and he determined that Black Raven was at the bottom of the visit of the old nego.

They did not for a moment suspect the real identity of the negro, as the disguise was too perfect to admit of suspicion.

"You must tell us what your business is with the gentleman."

"Can't do dat."

The men exchanged glances and determined to test the old fellow.

"Old man, do you know any of us?"

"Nebber recollect dat I eber seed either ob you *gimmen* alone!"

"You are sure?"

"Dis yere chile am shush."

"Will you describe the looks of the gentleman you are after?"

"Can't do dat."

"Why not?"

"Well, you *gimmen* all look alike, and dis yere chile ain't go no eddication; can't go into no 'scription; no, sah, dat yere ain't possibl!"

"Old coon, you're a fraud!"

"Eh, what's dat yere am sayin'?"

"I say you are a fraud!"

"Dis yere chile a fraud?"

"Yes."

"Golly! what kin an ole man like me do as a fraud, eh? Golly! it takes a slick sort ob man ter be a fraud. I'se an honest old coon, I le, dar ain't no mistake about dat yere!"

"Who sent you here?"

"Nobody."

"That won't do."

"Golly! who yerdink would send dis here chile heah?"

"Black Raven."

"I nebber looked ober at Black Raven in all my life, gemmen. No, no, dat yere won't do."

"You can't work that on us."

"I ain't gwine ter work nuffin on yer; I'se jus' comin' heah ter see a man."

"Get down on your knees, old man."

"Eh! what yere mean?"

"Down on your knees, coon."

The old man showed every sign of terror.

"Look heah, now, yer ain't gwine ter do no bad n wid an ole man!"

"Down with you!"

Down the old man fell on his knees.

"Say your prayers!"

"Eh!" ejaculated the old nego.

"Say your prayers!"

The old man's exhibition of terror increased, and his hands went up in a pleading attitude.

"Say your prayer!" came the command.

"Yer won't kill de ole man, gemmen; I'm done nuffin!"

"You die!"

"Yer gwine ter kill me?"

"Yes."

The old man's simulations were perfect.

"Golly, I'se a generl!" he exclaimed, in a tone of extreme and genuine anguish.

One of the men put a pistol to his temple.

How quick that pistol would have gone off had the holder of it known against whose temple it was pressed; and terrible were the chances Black Raven was taking, as there was a faint chance that a shrewder game than his own was being played against him at that moment.

Our readers may wonder at Black Raven taking such a desperate chance; but the fact was, he read just the exact portion of his peril in the eyes of the men and in the tones of their voices.

When the pistol was placed to his temple, the pretended old nego fairly groaned in agony and terror.

"Are you ready?" came the query.

"Yer don't mean it! Yer toolin' de ole man! Der ain't no game in killin' ole Jim!"

The tone of the disguised detective was perfect.

The men laughed. They were amused. They were a heartless lot, and the very despair in the old man's voice was music in their ears.

"We're not tooling, old coon."

"Why yer gwine ter murder dis yere ole chile? I'se nebbher done yer no harm—no, nebbher! nebbher!"

"You've lied to us."

"No, nebbher! no, nebbher!"

"Yes, you have lied to us."

"Will yer tell dis yere ole chile wharin hab lied ter yer?"

"You said you did not know the name

the man whom you came here to see."

"Dat am de trufe."

"Well, you refused to tell us your busis with him."

"Golly, I'se gwine ter do dat."

"You are, eh?"

"Yes, sah."

"Do so."

"I wer ober by de ruina cb de Frenchman's house, and I met a man ober dar. He wer searchin' in de ruina."

"What was he searching for?"

"Can't tell ya dat, but de man he tolle dis yere chile ter go ter work."

"Told you to go to work?"

"Yes, sah."

"What at?"

"Searchin' the ruina."

"What was he looking for, you old coon?"

"Anyting, sah, anyting! dat wer what he told dis yere chile!"

"Did you find anyting?"

"Yes, sah."

"What did you find?"

"I found sometin."

"Tell us what you found?"

"Oh, golly! ef I tell yer dat, de *gimmie* won't pay dis yere ole chile fer his trouble."

"We'll see that you get paid."

"Shush!"

"Yes."

"Golly! I wer workin' dar in dem yere ruina long lime."

"What did you find?"

"I jes' found sometin', dat am shauh."

"Will you tell us?"

"Yes, sah."

"Do so."

"I found dis yere ober dar."

The old darky produced the slipper Black Raven had discovered with the aid of his dog as he handed it to the men he watched them closely.

It was deep little game he was playing, and to a man like him there was a world of significance in the actions of the men.

If the men knew nothing of the owner, the production of the slipper would only provoke a laugh; but if they did know something of the owner, he had reason to look for a different exhibition, and it was the latter he sensed.

The men did not laugh, but a serious look came over the face of one of them.

"You found that slipper over at the rubat?"

"Yes, sah."

"When?"
"Dis yere bery night."
"Why have you come with such a story, eh? Do you want to fool the man who employed you out of his money?"

"No, sah."
"This is some darky gal's slipper."
"Does yer tink so?"
"Certainly."
"Yer ain't smart, boss. Golly! der ain't no gal, white or black, but one, who ever libed atrom dese yere parts dat could wear dat yere slipper!"

The men examined the slipper very closely.
"See here, old man, that slipper was worn within twenty four hours."
"Dat am shush!"

"Now, you tell us exactly where you picked it up."

The darky did tell the exact spot.
"Did you find anything else?"
"No, sah."
"Why did you not continue your search?"

"I se' beyed orders."
"What were your orders?"

"When I found anyting ter cum ober heah."
At this moment there came a startling interruption to the strange examination. Andy the Mex entered the apartment, and Black Raven was in a critical position.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

BLACK RAVEN had, during his career, been in many tight places, but never before in all his life had he stood face to face with such a dead "open and shut" against him, as at that moment.

He had just uttered the answer, "When I found anyting ter cum ober heah," and as he spoke, as stated, Andy the Mex entered the apartment.

"Hello!" cried the Mexican, "what is going on here?"

"Wait a moment," exclaimed one of the men, and addressing the pretended old negro, he asked: "Is this the 'gentlemen' who engaged you?"

"No, sah!"

The answer was an inspiration; the question was an excellent let out.

"This is not the gentleman?"

"No, sah."

"What does this all mean?" demanded Sarto, and as he spoke, he scanned the negro carefully.

"We've an odd fish here."
"But tell me what it is all about."

"This old fellow came in here looking for a 'genteman.'"

"Whc was he looking for?"

"He don't appear to know the gentleman's name."

"What does he want of him?"

"He says a man set him to work searching the ruins of the Frenchman's villa."

The moment Sarto heard the latter statement, he was deeply interested; addressing the old negro, he asked:

"Who set you to work?"

"A gemman."
"What gentelman?"

"Dat's what I don't know."
"What did he set you to look for?"

"Anyting."

A pallor overspread Sarto's face.
"He set you to look for anything, eh?"

"Yes, sah."
"What sort of a looking man was he?"

"Well, he looked someting like you, boss, but yer ain't der man, nohow!"

"I am not the man?"

"No, sah."
"You are sure?"

"Yes, sah."
"When did you see the gentelman?"

"Early dis yere chenin'."

"Look out, old man."

"Golly! I'se been lookin' out ober dar!"

"Look out that you tell the truth."

"I alius tell de trufe."

"You say a man met you there this even-

ing?"

"Yes, sah."

"At what hour?"

"Ten o'clock."

"It's now near merning."

"Yes, sah."

"I was over at the ruins about ten o'clock."

"Yes, sah, I seed you ober dar!"

The last answer was a stunner.

"You saw me over therie, eh?"
"Yes, sah."
"Did you speak to me?"
"No, sah."
"Why not?"
"I wer layin' low; didn't want ter see nobody."
"Did you find anything?"
"Yes, sah."
"What did you find?"
"Dat yer gemman's got what I foun' ober dar."

The man produced the slipper. Sarto seized hold of the foot-wear and examined it carefully.

The man was evidently greatly puzzled.
Andy the Mex was prepared to meet Black Raven un-er any disguise, and upon entering the room his suspicions were aroused concerning the old negro, but the latter's actions were so perfect the man was momentarily thrown clean off his guard.

"You found this slipper over there?"
"Yes, sah."
"Where did you find it?"
"Ober dar."
"In the ruins?"

"No, sah."

"Where?"

"Ober by de ruins."

"Tell me just where you found this slipper."

The negro designated the exact spot where he had found the slipper.

"And a man set you to search?"

"Yes, sah."

"Had you ever seen the man before?"

"No, sah."

"And he did not tell you what to look for?"

"Yes, sah. He tolle dis yere chile ter look out for de bones ob an ole man an' a gal, an' when I jes' foun' de slipper I cum ober heah."

"Why did you come here to look for the man?"

"He tolle dis yere chile ter cum ober heah."

"To this house?"

"Yes, sah."

Sarto was greatly mystified.

"Old man," he said, "you're lying."

"No, sah."

"Yes, you are."

"No, sah."

"You know well enough who you came over here to meet."

"Yes, sah."

"I thought so. Now, who did you come to meet?"

"De gemman dat set dis yere chile ter search de ruins."

There was something richly innocent in every reply of the old darky.

Sarto knew there was something wrong, but he did not know just where to get at the wrong."

"Old man," he said, "you play it well."

"Yes, sah; I se' jes' one ob de best fiddlers dat de boys am got roun' heah."

"I don't mean you play the fiddle well."

"I jes' do, boss. Golly, when dis yere ole chile once gets a hold ob de cremona he kin jes' make de sun and de moon stan' still ter listen ter de music."

An idea struck Sarto—he would put the old negro to the test.

"You play the fiddle, eh?"

"Yes, I se' de best fiddler roun'."

"Will you give us a tune?"

"Aint' got no time now."

"You have no time, eh? What have you got to do just now?"

"I se' lookin' for de man who set dis yere ole chile at work ober dar at de ruins."

"You can't play the fiddle."

"Yes, I kin, boss. I tell yer I se' a hummer wid de cremons."

"Then you must play us a tune."

"Get de fiddle, and I se' bound ter oblige you."

"I'll go and get a fiddle. I think there is one in the house."

Andy the Mex left the room, and a shadow passed over the brow of the old negro.

Black Raven began to suspect that Andy the Mex was playing something besides a fiddle just at that moment.

I woud not do for our hero to be caught napping. There was a chance for a funeral around there just at that moment.

The old negro might fiddle, and Sarto might take a notion to shoot, and if he did the jig was all over; at such dead range the charm that had

shielded Black Raven's life so many times would surely be broken.

A moment and Sarto returned.

The man brought a fiddle and bow with him, but alast there was a tell-tale gleam in his eye.

Black Raven knew that meant death for him to attempt to fiddle at that moment.

"Goody, boss!" he said, "ges I can't accommodate yer ter-night."

"Ahal!"

"I se' got de rhumatiz in dis yere arm."

"You're a fraud, you old coon!"

"I ain't no fraud, nuther."

"You came here to meet a friend of mine."

"Did I, boss?"

"Yes, you did."

"What am de name ob yer fren?"

Sarto drew a revolver and said:

"My friend's name is Black Raven!"

"Yer fren's name is Black Raven?"

"Yes."

"And yer tink I cum ober heah ter meet Black Raven?"

"Yes."

"Yer wrong, boss."

"I am?"

"Yes, kase I se' Black Raven heelf!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A SHELL did not explode in that room, but if it had, it could not have produced a greater excitement than did the announcement, "I se' Black Raven herself!"

The three men stood paralyzed in the presence of the wonderful detective.

Few readers who have not had the experience, can realize the power of prestige under like circumstances. It would appear that three to one, the men could have drawn their revolvers and have shot down the detective in his tracks; but who was the man who would venture the first shot?

Black Raven had drawn his revolvers, and stood prepared for business.

"How is it, boys," he said, "shall we have some fun?"

The men remained silent, mute, in the presence of the man who had downed so many.

Again the detective spoke:

"Throw down your arms, or I whistle and we fight!"

Andy the Mex spoke:

"We've no quarrel with you and, indeed, you forget that I have a condition with you."

"I forget nothing."

The detective backed toward the door; when he reached the latter he stepped backward over the threshold, and said:

"It will be death for any man to follow me!"

A moment later and he had disappeared.

The three men stood a moment longer silent; at length one of them said:

"This is a gol! What's his game?"

Andy the Mex answered:

"It's a wise man who will line out the game of Black Raven."

Meantime the detective rejoined Hazen.

"What have you discovered, old man?" said the detective.

Hazen gazed in amazement, for the detective had not changed his disguise.

"Who are you? Where did you come from?"

"Ober dar!"

The dog 'Tiger' came up and smelt around his master.

Black Raven could deceive human reason and hide his identity from human intelligence, but he could not disguise himself against the instinct of his dog.

Speaking in his natural voice, the detective said:

"The dog is smarter than yourself, Hazen?"

"Eh? why, goodness gracious; is this you, colonel?"

"At your service."

"Well, well, this is wonderful!"

"Come, Hazen, we have business on hand."

"I am at your service, sir."

"We must find that girl."

"I am satisfied she is beneath yonder roof!"

said Hazen.

"Why do you think so?"

"I tracked the party to that house."

"I do not believe she is there, Hazen."

"You are smarter than I am, and you may know, still it is my impression that she is there."

"We will return and search; you go to the house and see if the men are there."

"I might be shot down."

The detective did not mean for Hazen to go. He only spoke as he did as a test of the man's courage.

"You would not like to go there?"

"I would not. I have just escaped out of their hands. I do not wish to risk the chance of falling into their power again."

"Good enough, and good-night. You can not serve me."

"I am willing to aid you."

"No, no. The sun is about to rise. Make yourself scarce; seek your home, and lay low for a few days. The chances are really against you, as you are a marked man."

Hazen was only too glad to get away. He was a good spy in his own way, but he was not the man to attend upon Black Raven in the carrying out of the latter's perilous schemes.

When alone, the detective changed his disguise once more.

He had a method for changing which was a secret of his own.

Having transformed, he returned to the house. He found it deserted, and he entered and at once set to work to make a thorough search.

Half an hour later he issued from the place, fully satisfied that the girl had not been there at all.

Black Raven was a sort of night-bird. He did most of his tramping at night, and rested during the sunlight. He started to return to the rock castle. It was just in the gray of the morning. He had walked some two or three miles, when he stopped at a mountain rill to quench his thirst. He had just drunk to his satisfaction and was about seating himself to rest a moment, when he was aroused by hearing several frantic and shrill screams.

The voice was that of a female, and the cries were shrieks of terror.

The detective stopped a moment to listen and get the direction, when he started upon a run. He had not gone far when once again the shrill screams rang out upon the morning air.

Our hero quickened his pace and soon came upon the scene. He dropped to his knees in a clump of bushes in a little gully; just below him were three men, and struggling with them was a pretty mulatto girl.

The girl screamed once again as the detective came upon the scene, when one of the men exclaimed, with a fierce oath:

"Be silent, wench!"

The girl was terrorized into silence.

The man again spoke and said:

"Hang you, what do you want to scream for anyhow? We ain't going to hurt you?"

"Then let me go."

"That's just what we won't do."

"If you won't let me go, you must mean me harm."

"Where were you going?"

"To my old granny's."

"You were going to your old granny's, eh?"

"Yes."

"Why did you go off without letting us know you were going?"

"I expected to be back."

"That won't do, Crissy."

"I am telling the truth."

"Mebbe you are, and mebbe you were going to tell something to your old granny."

"What would I have to tell to my old granny?"

"You might tell her something about the white girl!"

Black Raven was in luck. He had struck the true trail at last. Those few words were volumes to the detective.

"I don't know anything about the white girl."

"That won't do, Crissy; now own up the truth!"

"I've nothing to own up."

"We don't want to hurt you, girl, but honest Injun, we'll kill you if you do not tell the truth!"

"Let me go!"

"Bah! it's no use asking to be let free; you had some purpose in slipping away from the house."

"I told you my purpose. I was a going to visit my granny."

One of the men, a villainously-looking "cuss," evidently a full-blooded Spaniard, said:

"What's the use fooling with her? Put a bullet in her brain and her tongue will keep silence."

The girl trembled from head to foot, as the

Spaniard, in his broken English, offered the cold-blooded advice.

"No, no, we won't kill the girl. She is going to tell us the truth, and then we will let her go free."

"I have nothing to tell."

"You must tell the truth, or that man will kill you!"

At this moment there came an interruption to the scene; a young man in a hunting-suit came down the opposite bank and joined the party.

The three men gazed at the new-comer in surprise, but their surprise was turned to anger when the young man exclaimed:

"Here, you villains, let that girl go free!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

SCOWLS darkened the faces of the villains as they gazed at the handsome young man.

"What do you want around here?" came the question.

"None of your infernal business as to what I want. All I've got to say to you fellows is, let the girl go free!"

"You're a loud 'un!" said one of the men.

The young man was about eight and-twenty, very handsome, with a frank, manly countenance.

"I have a right to talk loud! I'm in the right!"

"You're in the right, eh?"

"I am."

"Well, be right and go off about your business, sonny. I reckon you're a stranger around here."

"When I go off about my business I shall take that poor girl with me!"

"Well, you are a hero, you are. So when you go off you will take the girl with you?"

"I will."

"See here, sonny."

The man held forth a cocked revolver.

"You can not intimidate me."

"Oh, we can't intimidate you, eh? Intimidate is a good word, but you had better put a fence around it and keep it in; but let me tell you that this 'ere thing may go off, and as its pointed in your direction, you may go off too, and without the girl!"

"I do not fear you."

"Oh, you are very brave, but come, sonny, it's time to moosey."

"Will you release the girl?"

"Not to day, sonny, some other time!"

"What right have you to detain her?"

"None of your business!"

The girl spoke up and said:

"Young man, I am very much obliged for your interference in my behalf; but do not attempt to save me. These men are desperadoes, who would kill you at a word!"

"Now, missy!" exclaimed one of the men, "that is not fair. You are giving us a bad name."

Meantime, the young man said:

"I do not care how desperate they are, girl. I will not permit them to maltreat you."

"You can not aid me."

The young man carried a gun, and he dropped it from his shoulder into the palm of one of his hands; but as he did so, he received a sudden blow, which felled him to the ground.

One of the rascals had slipped around behind him, and had dealt the treacherous blow.

It was a hard knock the young man had received.

The mulatto girl uttered a cry of horror, and cried: "Shame!"

The men laughed as the handsome young man lay motionless where he had fallen.

Black Raven had been a witness to the whole scene. He had not expected a blow would be struck. Had he anticipated such a termination of the scene, he would have interfered; but it had been his desire to watch and learn what the men might reveal. As the young man was down, the detective still maintained his position, determined, however to prevent any further violence.

"Brutes!" exclaimed the mulatto girl.

The Spaniard approached the poor, helpless creature, and said:

"Come, girl, we've fooled long enough with

you!"

"I've answered you."

The man raised the butt of his pistol as though to strike her.

The girl cowered, but did not speak.

"Will you tell us where you were going?"

"I did tell you once."

"Your answer was a lie!"

"I have no other."

"Jack," said the Spaniard, "she may make trouble for us!"

"Give her one more chance."

"Will you speak, girl?"

The girl began to tremble more violently.

"Will you spare me if I tell the truth?"

"Yes, we will spare you."

"And let me go?"

"Yes."

"I was going to tell my granny about the white girl."

Meantime, the young man, who had recovered from the effects of the blow he had received, attempted to rise to his feet. He presented a Black Raven's opportunity had come. A voice called:

"Hold on, lads! what are you up to now?"

The detective stepped down from his place of concealment with two cocked pistols in his hands.

"Hello!" ejaculated the Spaniard, "here comes another fool!"

The detective smiled grimly as he answered:

"Yes, here comes another fool; but you are the bigger fool of the two."

"Who are you, anyhow?" demanded the Spaniard, with an oath and in his broken English.

"I'm no friend of yours, that is sure!"

The other two men stood silent. The two latter, to use a phrase current among sports, "had tumbled."

There was a boulder near where the detective stood, and he coolly seated himself, still keeping his pistols at a level.

"Step away from the girl!" said Black Raven.

"I reckon you're looking for fight, stranger."

"I am, and I'm going to have one."

The Spaniard looked over to his companions and said in a low tone:

"Let's set in on him."

The men made no response.

Addressing the two men the detective said:

"Lads, you've an opportunity to leave, but I'm going to have a racket with this fellow."

Our hero pointed the muzzle of one of his pistols toward the Spaniard.

The other men, however, showed no disposition to leave; in fact, they dared not leave.

The Spaniard, meantime, jerked up one of his pistols and fired.

The ball went wide. He had fired too soon. He did not fire a second shot, as his weapon fell from his grasp and his arm fell helpless to his side.

Black Raven had returned the fellow's shot and had maimed him.

The other two men had not taken a hand in the fight; the fact was, they knew their man.

The Spaniard cursed roundly, when the detective remarked:

"Shut up, old man, or I'll put the next bullet under your tongue."

Then turning to the two other men, our hero said:

"Well, boys, how is it, shall we exchange compliments?"

The two men stood silent.

We are not exaggerating the power of the detective over the men; there are a thousand men in America to day who are individually feared as those two men feared the detective at that moment.

"Come, come, boys, I'm waiting for an answer."

"We've no quarrel with you, Raven," came the answer.

Upon hearing the name "Raven," the Spaniard stated, while the mulatto girl exclaimed:

"I'm saved!"

"Yes, girl, you are safe; come over here, we may have a little pistol practice this bright morning."

The detective spoke as coolly as though he were merely rehearsing a good sentinel drill upon the stage.

The men, however, did not appear anxious to engage in a little pistol practice.

"Come, boys, shoot or throw up your hands!"

"We're ready to throw up."

"Down with your guns!"

The men drew their pistols from their belts and dropped them at their feet.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

ONCE again the detective was victor.

Meanwhile the young man had recovered his feet and, raising his gun, was about to commence to shoot.

"Hold on, my young friend, do not shoot!"

The young man would not have heeded the command, had not the mulatto girl leaped over and placed herself before him.

"Do not shoot! Hold!" she said, "I am free!"

The young man was still a little dazed from the blow he had received.

"That man is your friend and mine!" continued the mulatto girl.

"Who is he?"

"Black Raven!"

The young man appeared to comprehend, and he exclaimed,

"Thank Heaven! He is the man I was looking for! I am glad to have met him!"

The detective considered a moment what he should do. He could not let the men go free, as they would return and report his presence and remove the girl. He soon, however, decided upon his plan.

He took a rope and tied the three men together. The fellows quietly submitted. They knew that to attempt to resist was death.

Having secured his men, the detective said to the mulatto girl:

"You will come with me?"

"Yes."

"To the young man he said:

"You also?"

"I will."

To the three riders, "You will go with me also; we will make a nice party."

The detective sent off the dog Tiger with a note between his teeth, and our hero was well aware that he could not send a message by a more reliable postman. There was no opening of letters on that route.

Black Raven knew of a house far off in the mountains; it had once been a store-house to a still; the main building had been destroyed by some United States marshals some months previously, but the poor men had paid for their legal incendiaryism with their lives.

It was well on in the afternoon when our hero reached the place.

Half an hour after his arrival Bidwell and Little Chris appeared at the resort.

With the assistance of Bidwell, our hero securely bound the men, after having fed them with food brought by Bidwell, and placed them in the cellar of the building.

During the march our hero learned from the mulatto girl Crissy the incidents which led to her seizure by the three ruffians.

The girl lived with her family in a cabin near to a large house occupied by one of the most notorious families in the State.

The fame of the family came through their wickedness. One of the sons had been executed for murder, another was an outlaw, accused of murder, and the balance of the family, male and female, were noted for their wickedness.

The family had money, which it was known had not been honestly acquired, and they were the terror of the whole region.

The mulatto girl told how, for one or two nights, the most soul thrilling screams had been heard to issue from the house; and one day, when passing the premises, she had seen the face of a lovely white girl at one of the windows. At the same time one of the younger members of the family learned that the girl had made the discovery.

Crissy was met and questioned, but she denied having seen a face at the window.

The girl, however, was fully assured that she had seen a face, and what was more, she conceived that some great outrage was being perpetrated.

Her knowledge of the characters of the inmates of the place prepared her to believe the very worst.

The girl immediately after her discovery, became aware that she was being watched; still she was determined to give information as to the presence of the beautiful girl in the house.

First she determined, if possible, to communicate with the young lady, and she wandered around the house pretending to be gathering flowers; her purpose appeared to be suspected, as a man came and met her and accosted her with the question,

"What are you doing here?"

The girl attempted to face the affair out by being pert and saucy, and she answered:

"What is it to you what I am doing around here?"

The man was a stranger to the girl, not one of the members of the family whom she well knew.

"It's a good deal to me! I believe you are a thief!"

"What you dare call me a thief?" screamed the girl.

"Yes; I dare call you a thief!"

"You are a villain!"

"That's all right; but, hark you, girl! you leave from around here."

Crissy was frightened. She had not believed the master quite as such us; but she did not let the ruffian know that she was frightened.

"I reckon I've a right to walk in the road."

"You heard what I said?"

"Yes, I heard what you said; but I guess you won't cut my throat!"

"I will, in a minute; You are warned, so look out!"

The man went away, and Crissy also thought it best to move from the premises.

On the following morning the girl determined to go and give information as to her discovery. She lay awake all night thinking the matter over, and just before daylight quietly stole away. She had reached the ravine where the scene occurred of which our hero was a witness, when she was suddenly confronted by the three men, and neither of the men were members of the family who resided in the house where the girl was a prisoner.

The above was the tale the girl told to our hero.

Black Raven well knew the character of the men where the fair face had been seen at the window. The fellows were not mooners, but rail-road wreckers, train-robbers, forgers, horse-thieves, and the like; indeed, they were regular desperadoes.

Black Raven could not understand how it chanced that the fair Alvia had fallen into the hands of the Guerder family.

"Did you see the girl at the window more than once?" he asked.

"No."

"You say you heard screams?"

"Yes."

"Always at night?"

"Yes."

"How many times?"

"Two nights in succession."

"Did you hear any screams last night?"

"No."

"And you only saw the face ones?"

"Only once."

"Did any one else see the face?"

"Not that I have heard."

Black Raven felt assured that at last he was upon the right trail. He did not question for a moment the identity of the fair prisoner. He was assured that it was Alvia's face that Crissy had seen.

Our hero, during the walk to the old stone house, had exchanged but a few words with the young man whose life, practically, he had saved.

Once in the old house, our hero called the young man aside and demanded:

"My friend, what is your name?"

"I can not tell you my name."

"Very well, will you tell me what you are doing in the mountains?"

"You are Black Raven?"

"I am Black Raven."

"Then I will confide in you and tell you a strange tale."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

The detective had determined to visit the house where the fair prisoner was detained during the night. Meantime, he listened to the story of the young man, who had refused to give his name.

It was a strange story which our hero heard, and much light was thrown upon certain singular incidents in the career of the Frenchman, M. Aunai.

As our tale proceeds, the wonderful story told by the young man will be detailed, but at the present stage of our narrative, the statement would be premature.

One fact was fully established, Alvia Aunai was a prisoner in the hands of the Guerder family. The detective could not understand how the girl had fallen into the possession of the wretched names. He had heard of the family; indeed, they were on his black list, but it did not appear that they engaged in the illicit whisky traffic.

The girl Crissy gave the detective full details of the history of the family as far as she was cognizant of the same.

Our hero held a long consultation with Bidwell, and finally decided up on his course; it was determined that the prisoners should be left under the charge of Chris Wonder; the young stranger was also persuaded to remain together with Crissy.

Our hero gave Chris Wonder full particulars as to how he was to act under certain contingencies.

It was late in the afternoon when Bidwell and the detective started toward the home of the Guerders.

The two men had traveled for some hours, the sun had set and they were in the vicinity of the house, when suddenly they were brought to a halt. A second time they had run into the midst of an ambuscade.

Black Raven was compelled to decide upon his course upon the instant. He knew well that the same ruse that had served him upon a former occasion could not be worked a second time successfully.

A dozen guns were aimed at the two men at the moment they were commanded to stand.

Black Raven said in a whisper to his companion:

"It's dead against us; you may surrender if you choose, but, as for me, I will take the chances of a scrimmage."

The answer came also in a whisper:

"It's sure death either way, but we will die with our guns in our fists."

Black Raven uttered a yell like a wild Indian, and commenced blazing away with his revolvers; at the same instant the riders let fly a volley.

It would appear that both men must surely have been shot down, but they were both old fighters, and, as they yelled and fired they dropped to the ground and the gang scattered.

The action of the detective and his companion had been unexpected, the gang were thrown into confusion, they discharged their guns at random, and in the mêlée Black Raven and Bidwell rolled over and over like hoosnakes and made cover.

Neither of the men were hit.

The moment they struck the brush both leaped to their feet, and away they sped like the wind, and were soon beyond immediate danger.

"A close shave," remarked Black Raven.

"A close shave," returned Bidwell, "well, I should say it was. I had given up all hope. I never would have made a fight."

"It's a good thing, old man, to resolve never to say die; but, after all, I do not like the prospect."

"The game does appear to be against us."

"You are right. The woods are full of these fellows, and they will be on the 'lay' for us."

"Do you think any of the Guerder family were in that gang?"

"No."

"Were they 'laving' for us, do you think?"

"I do not. It's my idea that we ran dead into them. They were as much surprised as we were."

"Will you postpone the scheme?"

"No, sir."

"We are not far from the Guerder family home."

"I know that."

"It is just possible that they expect a visit, and are ready for us. They may be on their guard because their 'pals' did not return."

"Bidwell, we must get into the Guerder house to-night."

"We may get in there, but the question arises, how will we get out?"

"We must get in and out."

"I'm with you, Raven. Where you go, I'll follow. You can bet on that."

"Do you recollect the game Iron Bridges and Gypsy Blair played once?"

"I do."

"I wonder if you and I could not work that racket?"

"We might do it in the day-time, but suspicion would be aroused if we attempted it at night."

"We are only a few hours walk from the

rock castle. We can go over there and 'make up.'"

"And adjourn the scheme until morning?"

"Yes."

"A good idea."

The two men started to go toward the rock castle.

Black Raven had all the necessary appliances for the assumption of the disguise he had decided upon.

It may appear that a man like our hero would have gone right ahead and have entered the house, but we would call our reader's attention to the fact that constant peril does not always lessen the danger, nor does continuous luck always follow a usually lucky man.

The detective had passed through many tight spots, but there still remained the possibility that, with such large odds against him, some day he might go down.

Again, every day, indeed, every hour, increased the peril and lessened his chances for getting through all safely.

The riders were in a desperate mood; they had put aside all other schemes and had set themselves to "lay out" Black Raven.

The two men reached the rock castle and worked up their little transform.

On the morning following the scenes described, a curious-looking couple might have been seen riding along the mountain road, leading to the residence of the Guerder family.

There was an old man, a regular old timer, an old chap who looked for all the world as though he had risen from a grave into which he might have been planted some weeks prior to the signing of the declaration of independence.

In company with the old man was a fat, tow-haired old lady, who also appeared as though she might have hopped out of a grave adjacent to the one from whence, as stated, the old fellow might have come forth.

The two old people were odd-looking enough; but their horse, also, was a queer-looking animal, and their conveyance was one of the crankiest looking old turnouts ever seen since the days of the flood.

Taken all in all, it was about the oddest lot—man, woman, horse and wagon—ever seen around the section by even the oldest inhabitant.

As the old couple rode along, their conversation proved to be as strange as their appearance.

"Well, Josh!" exclaimed the old woman "you certainly am a wonder, and yet kin just make up yer mind that there won't be no tumble this time."

"You jest wait, Hannah, and yet will see the greatest tumble yer ever took a hold on since th' day yer were born."

The old woman laughed, and the old man laughed, and they laughed together, and they kept on laughing, and the people who met them on the road laughed.

The old couple still moved along, until suddenly they beheld ahead of them a number of horsemen.

"Hello, old gal!" exclaimed the old man. "there comes some cavalry, and we'd better look out, or our old nag will get scared and give us that ole little tumble we were talking about ahead of time!"

The old oddities, however, rode right along, despite the danger of their animal's running away.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

A FEW moments later, and the old couple were right in the midst of a cavalcade of at least twenty of the mooners.

The riders halted the old pair, and their leader rode forward and demanded:

"Hello, grandma and grandpa, where are you going?"

The latter took upon himself to answer, and replied:

"I reckon it's none of your tarnation business where we are going. We didn't ask no questions of you, did we?"

"You're spunky, old man."

"And you're impudent, and you've no business to talk to an old man nigh onto eighty years."

"I wish you weren't quite so old!"

"You do?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"If you were a younger man, I'd teach you manners."

"Darnation, a young skit like you teach a man of my age and experience manners! Why, look a-here, young man, you jest get off that

horse and step down in the road and I'll warn your ears for you as I would lad thirteen."

The riders all laughed at the spunky old man.

"Yer all laughing, are ye? Well, the invitation is open to any one of you. It's time somebody taught you manners."

"What have you got to say about it, granny?" inquired one of the men.

"Yer want to know what I've got to say about it, eh?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'd like ter see one of yer get down in the road. My Josh was a lively man once, and I don't think it would trouble him much now to knock a little manners into some of your sancy pates."

"Hello! the old woman is spunky, too," laughed the men.

The party rode off, and left the two old people glaring at them.

When once more alone, the old couple chuckled, and the woman said:

"It's just wonderful."

"It's easy enough," responded the old man, and he added: "The fact is, the mountains are full of those fellows, and I knew that we would be compelled to adopt some extraordinary disguise to run through them!"

The old people drove a little further, and were riding through a forest road, when suddenly they were surrounded by a gang of men on foot.

It appeared as though the forest was full of ambuscaders, as the old man had suggested.

The latter party were a rough set.

"Hello, grandpa," exclaimed their leader, using the same mode of address that had been used by the leader of the riders.

"Well, now, what do you want, I'd like to know?"

"Where are you going?"

"It appears to me," replied the old man, "that you fellers are looking for some one."

"What makes you think so?"

"Well, the other gang we met below on the road asked the same question."

"So you met another gang, eh?"

"Yes, we did."

"How long ago?"

"Not more than ten minutes ago."

"And you told them your business?"

"No, I didn't, no more than I am going to tell you."

"I'm sorry, pop, but our orders are to let no one pass here this morning."

"That's your orders, eh?"

"Yes."

"Who issued your orders?"

"The colonel."

"I thought the war was over several years ago. Has it broken out again?"

The men all laughed.

The old man appeared so simple and innocent they were highly amused.

The fact was, the old man and his female companion were highly amused also, but the amusement of the latter arose from an entirely different cause.

"Go along, old man, I reckon the colonel didn't mean for us to stop two such old odds and ends as you and your wife."

"I reckon you're right there, young man, but I'm bound to tell yer I don't know what this ere all means, guarding the highways with armed men in times of peace."

"Where did you come from, old man?"

"None of your business."

"That's all right, go along and don't ask any questions, seeing you are set not to answer any yourself."

The old man whipped up his horse and drove ahead. When beyond sight and hearing, he said to his companion:

"Bidwell, old man, there is something wrong."

"That's what I've been thinking," was the reply.

"It's a holiday to-day with the mooners, they're all abroad."

"They're looking for some one, Raven."

"Of that you may be assured, and I've a suspicion."

"What do you suspect?"

"Information of our movements has got abroad some way."

"And you think they are all on the lay for us?"

"That's my idea."

"Matters may become hot before we go through," returned Bidwell.

Black Raven smiled and answered:

"It will be a much neater game for us to go in and win under all the strange circumstances."

"If we can go in and win."

"We will."

The two detectives so strangely disguised drove along and soon came in sight of the home of the Guerders.

The house in which the latter lived was a rather pretentious dwelling, considering its situation and the general surroundings.

The building stood upon the center of a barren lot, but just beyond on every side was a dense growth of wood.

A fence surrounded the grounds, and a gate opened from the road to a carriage-way leading up to the house.

The building was crossed on two sides by a piazza, and upon the latter sat several men at the moment the strange old couple attempted to drive by, for the moment the horse arrived opposite the gate he commenced to act in a very frantic and violent manner.

The old man rose up in the tumble-down cart and commenced to father the beast well, when the animal commenced to back and kick in the most terrible manner, and suddenly he made a plunge, the cart was upset, and the old people were tumbled out, and the animal ran away at a furious gallop.

The men on the stoop, upon witnessing the catastrophe, ran down to the assistance of the old couple.

The old man lay quiet, as though badly injured; but the woman had recovered her feet, and was going on at a mad rate, abusing the old gentleman for having been so foolish as to apply the "gad" to "such a spirited" horse.

The old man lay sprawled out, and just beyond his grasp lay a large wallet, from which protruded a half-uncovered roll of greenbacks.

As the men from the piazza came to assist the old fellow, the latter made a grab for the pocket-book, and, leaping to his feet, commenced ramming it into his pocket. At the same instant he exclaimed:

"No, you don't!"

"No we don't what, old man?"

"You don't steal my pocket-book! I've worked high into fifty years to get that pile, and I mean to hang on to it, you bet!"

The men exchanged glances, and so did the old man and the old woman.

A neat and deep double game had already commenced.

"We don't want your pocket-book, old man."

"That's all right. I never did meet anybody that wanted 'greeners,' but they all make an awful scramble to hold on to 'em when they've got 'em, and so I do."

As the old fellow spoke, he groaned and commenced to feel around like a man who was injured. So far, the scheme, a deep one, was working well.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE Guerder men showed considerable interest in the old couple. One of them advanced to the old gentleman and asked:

"Are you hurt?"

"I don't know, friend; but I don't feel pretty well, and my horse has gone away, flying."

"Yes; your horse is five miles from here by this time, unless somebody has stopped him."

"I reckon the people around here are not all tarnation fools. They'd stop a runaway horse, wouldn't they?"

"There ain't many people along the route your old man traveled, stranger; and I reckon there ain't much of him left, anyhow."

"By Jiminy, I hope nothing happens to that 'ar horse. It's a borrowed horse, and I'd hav to pay it anything happened to him."

"I reckon you wouldn't have to pay much, old man."

"I'd hav to pay his full worth."

"Seventy-five cents would settle the bill of costs, old man."

"Well, you go and catch him, and I'll give you the seventy-five cents, and that's a good bit of money."

"We'll go after him."

Two of the men started off to recover the horse, and in the meantime the old man and his wife were invited to enter the home of the Guerders.

The two detectives exchanged glances, and accepted the invitation. Thus far matters had worked magnificently; but, after all, the air hung heavy—there was death in the air.

Once in the house, the old couple received

every attention. A meal was provided, and everything passed off as naturally and smoothly as though the Guerders were honest people and the two detectives really what they seemed.

In about an hour the men who had gone to recover the horse returned and announced to the old man that the animal had got clean away.

"Indeed," said the man, "he has returned to his stable, wherever that may be, and I reckon no one has considered him worth stopping."

"If they knew I'd give seventy-five cents for his return, I reckon you'd have had half the people on the mountain looking out to stop him."

The old man spoke of the seventy-five cents as though it were an immense sum of money.

A better-played game was never worked by two dairying detectives. The Guerders were smart fellows, and when they could be so well blinded the game must have indeed been an extraordinarily good one.

The afternoon passed and night fell.

The Guerders had invited the old couple remain until the following morning.

In answer to a demand for another horse, the Guerders had said they had no horse fit to drive, but upon the following morning they would have a team that the old man should have as a loan without cost.

"No, sir," said the old man, "I never take anything I don't pay for right down. I'm not an extravagant man; I never throw money away, but I always pay for all I get. You hitch up the team for me in the morning, and I'll pay seventy-five cents for the use of it."

"Where do you wish to go?"

"Over to M—."

"If you were on your way to M—, how is it you got way over in this part of the country?"

"Well, I'll tell you I don't know the roads whereabouts very well, and we must have taken the wrong turn somewhere."

"You are welcome to stay here until morning."

"Thank you; I reckon we'll have to accept your invitation; I'm pretty well shaken up, and I'll feel better able to go on in the morning, but I'll not stay here for nothing, nohow—so, sir, I'll pay you for a night's lodging for me and the old woman. Yes, I'll give yer seventy-five cents, and I tell yer that will be pretty good pay."

As stated, the old people were beguiled into remaining overnight, and at an early hour they were shown to their bedroom, a little cramped chamber on the top floor.

Up to the last moment the two detectives had kept up their fine play of innocence and amusing rusticity, but when once shown into their room a change came over the tenor of their behavior.

While pretending to be so simple and innocent, the two detectives were picking up a heap of information.

They discovered that there was a large number of men in the house; indeed, a grand collection of desperadoes from distant points. A sort of annual convention of rogues, as Bidwell called it.

"Well, old man, what do you think of it?" demanded Bidwell.

Black Raven was thoughtful a moment, but at length replied, in a low tone:

"There's something going on, Bidwell."

"You bet there is something going on."

"Some of the worst men in America are under this roof to-night."

"You are right, Raven."

"We have seen nothing of the apparition—nothing, nor have we overheard a word that would indicate the presence of the beautiful ghost."

"And yet she must be in this house some where."

"I've an idea, Raven. It may be that we have fallen foul of a new mystery. You will remember that the mulatto girl Crissy only got a passing glimpse of the young lady at the time the screams were heard, and we've no proof that it is the ghost that is here. To tell the truth, I do not see what game the Guerders would have with the apparition. She was said to be in the hands of the 'mooners,' and the 'mooners' are a diff'rent class of men from the crowd gathered beneath this roof."

"That was a cunning answer the Guerders made when they told us it was a family relation; but, at the same time, it proved our immediate safety."

"It proved that we were playing our part well."

"It did, indeed. And now, old man, the serious business commences."

"How are you going to work this thing?"

"Well, I've a plan in my mind. It's a dangerous trip; but we are in danger, anyhow, as it stands. There's no way out for us but to cut our way through, and we might as well run the gauntlet one way as the other."

"I reckon we've struck out cemetery this time, Raven, although everything has run slick so far."

"I've been in tighter places, Bidwell, without half our present show to pull out, and I reckon we'll go through this time; but we may march out to some real lively music."

"The house has a rough gang under its roof."

"Yes, sir, a very rough gang, and you can make up your mind that something important is in the wind."

"What is your game, now, that's what I'm asking?"

"How are all your weapons?"

"In good condition."

"You are sure?"

"I am, dead sure."

"It will not do for us to make one miss fire, when the racket really begins."

"You are calculating on a scrimmage?"

"A big one."

"Will you run us two against the gang in the house?"

"Do you weaken?"

"No, I am only asking for information."

"It may be necessary for us to start in against the whole gang. I shall not invite the racket."

"How about the girl?"

"If I can find the girl and get away with her, we will avoid a fight, but I am resolved to brave every chance to rescue the girl."

"You are not sure she is here?"

"I am not, but I propose to find out; so let us get ready."

The two men commenced removing their disguises; they were preparing for a fierce combat.

When the transform had been completed, Black Raven said:

"You stay here, and I will go and look for the girl."

Some strange and wonderful adventures followed.

CHAPTER XL

BLACK RAVEN had set in for a terrible time, but he was none the less determined to see the affair through.

He stole up to the upper part of the old house, reached the attic, and he was in business at once.

A woman lay upon a rickety lounge fast asleep.

The lounge had been set directly across where door opened into an attic apartment.

Our hero took in the situation at once. He had struck the place where the girl was concealed the first move.

Black Raven had himself indulged a suspicion that the fair prisoner might be some other party than the apparition; but she was a prisoner all the same, young and beautiful, and he meant to save her, or die in the attempt.

The detective stood a moment and gazed at the woman while deciding upon his course.

He did not take long to consider. An instant later, with a cat-like tread, he crossed the room; his iron fingers closed in on the woman's throat, and when she awoke she was speechless—the iron hand held her in too vice-like a grip.

Black Raven did not need to ask any questions, as he whipped out a gag with one hand while he held the woman's throat with the other, and deftly he inserted the "patent seal," or "buzz quiet," and the danger for a moment was over.

The detective had no time to spare, and he soon had the woman strapped to her bed, and it would have taken an old salt to untie the knots.

Having the woman secured, the detective lifted the bed away from the door, forced the latter, and entered the room.

Upon a cot in the attic-room lay the form of a girl.

The detective flashed the light of his dark-lantern across the face, and his heart stood still; he was gazing upon the worn but beautiful face of Alvia Aumat.

"Ah! I've struck it at last!" he said.

It was necessary that the detective should move carefully.

He dared not wake the girl lest she might scream and give his presence away, and he partly closed the mask of his lantern.

A moment he stopped and considered what he should do. His time was but short, as stated. He decided upon seemingly harsh measures. He would have chanced arousing the girl, but he remembered that she had most probably gone deaf, and, if so, she would surely scream, and he could not have quieted her.

He acted quickly.

The girl fortunately had laid down without disturbing, which was a point in our hero's favor. The detective caught the girl by the throat, as he had the woman at the door, and he also gagged her; when, raising her light form in his giant arms, he stole from the room, and made his way back to the apartment where he had left his friend.

"Hello!" exclaimed the latter, in a low tone of amazement, "what have you here?"

"I've caught a ghost sure, old man; but come, we've no time to spare; follow me."

The detective led the way into the hall and along a passage to where a window opened on a back shed. The two men with their burden passed through the window, across the roof of the shed, and so down to the ground.

Once on the ground they moved rapidly away to the woods, some six or seven hundred feet distant.

"Well," exclaimed Bidwell, drawing a long breath, "this is a good night's work."

Meantime the poor captive had lain passive in the arms of the detective, but he had seen her eyes glaze with a wild look of terror.

Even in that moment the detective recognized that passive glance of fear and terror as a good sign—where there was terror there was reason.

"Now, Bidwell," said our hero, "we must act quickly."

"What shall we do?"

"Turn thieves."

"What are we needing, captain?"

"Horses."

"There are over a dozen hitched around the house yonder."

"I know it, and we want two of them."

"Possess yourself in patience a few moments, Raven, and I will have a pair of the best of them."

"That's the racket, old man; go it."

Bidwell, with the stately tread of an Indian, ran across the intervening space toward the house.

Fortune, thus far, had favored the two men; the Guerders were busy with their friends.

Bidwell managed to secure two horses, which he led over to where the detective lay low with his beautiful charge.

A moment later and the two men were mounted, and away they rode toward the rock castle.

When near the castle Bidwell was dispatched to bring over Chris Wonder and the young man, the stranger, while Crissy was to be set free.

"What shall I do with the two prisoners?"

"Lead them off a distance and set them free; they are no good, anyhow," said the detective.

Our hero proceeded alone to the rock castle, and carried his burden to the rock chamber.

Strange enough were his emotions when he set down his burden and removed the gag.

The room was well lighted, and the girl sat and gazed at him in silence.

The detective meantime stood aghast. He had made a most thrilling and startling discovery. The apparition was not Alvia Aumat, although she bore a most wonderful and striking resemblance to the beautiful French girl.

A moment Raven stood and contemplated his captive, when in a low, kindly tone he said:

"Do not be afraid, you are safe now."

"Who are you?" came the question.

"I am Black Raven, the detective."

"I never heard of you."

"Enough; will you tell me who you are?"

The girl had spoken in a reasonable manner, like one whose reason was unimpaired.

"Will you first tell me why you brought me here?"

"I will. I thought you were the daughter of a dear friend of mine."

"Who is your friend?"

"Monsieur Aumat."

The detective had thought it best to tell a straight story, as he had discovered, despite the singular circumstances, that he was talking to

a person who possessed her full reasoning powers.

When the detective pronounced the name M. Aumal the beautiful girl uttered a low moan, and said:

"Monsieur Aumal is my father."

"Your father?"

"Yes"

"And your name is—"

"Louise Aumal."

"You have a sister?"

"I have a sister Alvia."

"A twin sister?"

"No."

"Miss Aumal, we have met under remarkable circumstances. Will you tell me how it happens you were a rover around the mountains?"

"I can not tell you my story."

"I am your friend. I will take you to your father."

The detective believed M. Aumal to be dead. I only made the premise in order to see what girl would say, and hoping to gain her confidence.

The answer he received was remarkable and startling. The girl said, in determined tones: "I do not desire to go to my father. I have escaped from him. He is a tyrant!"

CHAPTER XL.

A SUDEN revelation flashed in upon the detective's mind. He remembered the story he had been told by the young man whose life he had saved.

All was plain to him at last.

"Miss Aumal," he said, "do you remember when and how you escaped from your father?"

"Yes."

"Will you tell me?"

"No."

"I will ask you one more question. Were you conscious of your actions while roaming around the mountains?"

"Yes."

"At no time have you been in a condition when you did not know just what you were doing?"

"At no time have I been in such a condition."

"Why did a delicate young lady like you roam around through wind and storm?"

"I had no place to go."

"And you were conscious all the time that you were a lone wanderer?"

"I was."

"Why did you not seek shelter somewhere?"

"I did not desire shelter; I preferred to roam free as air. I have been a prisoner for many years."

"How was it you fell into the hands of the people from whom I rescued you to-night?"

"I was surprised and made prisoner by them."

"Why did they keep you?"

"I do not know."

"Do you remember a young man named Victor Alveron?"

The beautiful girl uttered a wild cry, and fell insensible at the feet of our hero.

The story of the young stranger told our hero was as follows:

"My name is Victor Alveron. I am the son of a French manufacturer by his first wife. I met a young lady, a French girl, whose father resided in America. I loved her, and we became betrothed secretly. Later on, I told my father of the engagement, and he disapproved of the match, and sought to induce me to break the engagement. I refused. My father became angered, and, in the end, after some months cast me off."

Meantime the detective, who was listening to the story, asked:

"Did the father of your betrothed consent to the marriage?"

"He did not. His daughter had been left in France with a relative of her mother. She had been separated from her father from infancy, he having gone to America with another child. The guardian of the young lady communicated with the father, who came to France and carried his child away. I have never been able to find her since."

"Why did her father object to you as the husband of his daughter?"

"I do not know."

"What was the name of your betrothed?" asked the detective.

"Louise Monthalbert."

"And you came to America to find him?"

"Yes."

"You have not succeeded?"

"I have not."

"How is it you came to the mountains?"

"I heard that there was a French gentleman residing here, named Monsieur Aumal. I intended to seek him out, in hopes that he might give me some information concerning Monsieur Monthalbert."

The above was the story our hero listened to from the lips of the young man whose life he had saved, and when the fair girl fell insensible at the mention of his name the detective knew that Louise Aumal and Louise Monthalbert were one and the same person.

Black Raven was an old hand at dealing with fainting women, and he soon managed to bring the beautiful girl back to consciousness.

"My dear girl," said he, when she had fully revived, "you are surprised at hearing me mention the name of Victor Alveron."

"Who are you?" demanded the girl.

"I have told you who I am, and chance threw me in the way of the young man whose name I mentioned. I did him a great service and he told me his story; now will you tell me yours?"

"Does Victor live?"

"He lives."

"And he is in America?"

"He is not far from here."

"I shall see him?"

"You shall see him in a few hours."

"You are indeed my friend. You say Victor told you his story?"

"He did."

"Then you know all?"

"I do not know why your father objected to the marriage."

"I can tell you why. My father is a French nobleman, in political exile, a proud man. Victor's father told my father an infamous falsehood."

"What did he tell him?"

"That his pretended son, Victor, was illegitimate."

The detective began to see through the romance.

"Do you know that the story was false?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"My aunt knew the young man's mother."

"Why did she not correctly inform your father?"

"She did, but my father preferred to believe the terrible tale despite my aunt's statements."

"Now tell me how you came to be roaming around the mountains?"

"My father is a monster, or he is insane. He brought me to America, and kept me a close prisoner. He did not let any one know of my existence. He had a secret underground apartment built under his residence; I was kept a prisoner there for three years."

When the girl made the statement concerning an underground apartment, the detective uttered an ejaculation of amazement, a second wonderful revelation flashed over his mind. The mystery of no remains being found in the ruins was explained, and the suspicion came to him that M. Aumal and his daughter still lived.

"Proceed," he said to the fair girl.

"One night my father brought me from my prison; something extraordinary had occurred; a moment he left me alone; it was the only opportunity I had ever had, and I improved it. I ran away, and I have since learned that upon that same night my father's mansion was burned down."

A great many mysteries are made plain to our readers by the above explanations, and we will not try their patience by going into more exact details.

"Have you sought your father?"

"No. I do not wish to seek him. He is unjust."

"You still love Victor?"

"As woman never loved man before. And you say he lives and is here?"

"He has been seeking you the world over."

"Then he is true to me?"

"Yes."

"I knew it, although they tried to make me believe that he was false. I shall see him!"

"Listen. You shall see him upon one condition."

"What right have you to make a condition?"

"I saved you from captivity; I saved his life; I am your friend; I am his friend; I am also your father's friend."

"What condition would you make?"

"I will find Monsieur Aumal, your father."

We will go to him—you, Victor and I. Victor shall prove that his own father's story was a falsehood coined to prevent a marriage."

"My father will kill him!"

"No. I will be responsible for his life and also for your father's willing consent to the marriage."

"And I shall see Victor?"

"Yes."

"Will you promise?"

"I will. Victor is here."

CHAPTER XLII.

WHILE talking with the beautiful girl the detective had received a signal that warned him that his friend Bidwell and his party had arrived.

When Raven said "Victor is here," the girl uttered an exclamation of delight, and said:

"Take me to him."

"One moment. You remain here and you shall see him."

Our hero went to the outer room, where he met the young man Victor Alveron.

The two held an earnest conversation, and a moment later Victor entered the adjoining chamber and stood face to face with his long-lost love. We will not tell what passed, but some time later when the detective entered the rock chamber he beheld two happy beings.

Our hero held a long consultation with both of them, and it was finally agreed that Louise and Victor should proceed under the care of Bidwell to Savannah, where they were to await the arrival of our hero.

Upon the following day, under the escort of Black Raven, the party of three started for the nearest railway station, and it was midnight before Black Raven returned to the rock chamber.

The detective's adventures had been thrilling and startling, but he had his main work yet to accomplish.

At the time of the burning of the Aumal mansion, Black Raven had been just prepared to close in on the men he had entered the mountains to trail down, but the tragedy at the Frenchman's home had delayed his closing-in game.

Meantime, consternation had prevailed at the home of the Guerder family.

It was not until they entered the room of the old couple, with evil intent, that they discovered that the odd old birds had flown.

Later on, upon going to the attic, they discovered that the fair captive had fled also.

The girl had been made a prisoner with the hope that a heavy ransom might be extorted for her return to her parents. The Guerders had come upon her roaming around the mountains, but had failed to learn her real identity, the girl having refused to give any account of herself. Upon discovering that she had been taken away their anger was great, and they could not explain the mystery until the woman who had been gagged suggested the name of Black Raven, and, later on, Andy the Mex settled the question, as he was in with the Guerders, as well as a modher.

One week following the departure of Louise Aumal for Savannah there was great excitement through the whisky district in the mountains.

Black Raven had commenced his "closing-in" game, and several very prominent men were trailed and arrested.

The business received a staggering blow, and several bad characters were placed within the clutches of the law.

The detective's job was over. He had done his work thoroughly and well, and had made happy the heart of his little aid and side-partner, Chris Wonder.

Our hero was prepared to go to Savannah; but decided, before leaving the mountains, to pay a visit to the ruins of M. Aumal's house, in hopes that he might find some clew that would serve to lead him to a discovery of the whereabouts of his friend.

It was a clear, moonlight night. Chris Wonder was with Black Raven, and they had just arrived in sight of the ruins, when Chris exclaimed:

"Look dar, boss; dar am a ghost, shuah!"

The detective had already discerned the figure of a man clambering over the ruins.

He advanced, and a glad cry escaped involuntarily from his lips upon recognizing M. Aumal, alive and well.

The Frenchman would have retreated, upon

seeing that he was discovered, but it was too late.

A moment later the two men recognized each other, and exchanged greetings.

After a few preliminary explanations, the detective asked:

"Will you tell me, sir, how you escaped?"

The Frenchman explained the mystery of the underground apartment, and stated how, when the fire had commenced, he had been joined by his daughter and servants, and how they had all gone down to the fire-proof refuge, and had remained there in safety, and, later on, how they had come forth and had escaped.

The two gentlemen talked a long time, standing beside the ruins, and looking weird under the moonlight, with the strange surroundings.

At length M. Aumal said:

"I have a sad tale to tell. I am an afflicted man."

The detective was rejoiced at the old Frenchman's tone.

M. Aumal told the story which our hero had heard from other lips, but he did not let on that the story was not new to him.

Our hero asked M. Aumal a great many questions, and learned that the old gentleman had come to repent his monstrous harshness. He said:

"Oh, had I but listened to the earnest beseechings of Alvia, I should not now be mourn-

ing the untimely end of one—a dear and lovely child."

"Your child is dead?"

"She must be dead. I have had men searching for her in every direction. It was my idea that she had fled to France, but I am now satisfied that she perished upon the mountains."

"Your daughter lives," said the detective.

"My child lives!"

"Yes."

"How do you know, good friend?"

The detective told his wonderful story. The father listened with breathless attention.

"And you saved her?" he cried.

"Yes."

"And she is with Victor?"

"She is."

"I am so thankful."

"But will you consent to the marriage?"

"I will be only too overjoyed to see my children happy."

"Then why were you so cruel?"

"I believed the story Victor's father told me, but I have since become fully convinced that it was untrue."

"Your conduct was unjustifiable, even though the story was true; but come, we will start this very night for Savannah."

In due time the party reached Savannah, and our hero led the way to the hotel to which he had directed Bidwell.

The detective met his friend, and was shown into the presence of Louise Aumal.

Explanations followed, and a few moments later father and daughter were clasped once more in each other's arms, and a full and complete reconciliation followed.

That same evening our hero sat in his room with little Chris Wonder, when the latter asked:

"Boss, what are yer gwine ter do wid me now dat de job we had on hand am complete?"

"I am going to keep you with me, Chris, as long as you live, if you are willing."

"It's a bargain, boss, dat am shure. Dis yere chile's name am Wonder, but you are der real Wonder, and I'se boun' ter stick by yer as long as yer will let me."

Upon the following day our hero once more stood in the presence of the beautiful Alvia, and from her own lips listened to thankful and grateful words.

A week later Victor and Louise were married, and M. Monthalbert sailed for France accompanied by his two daughters and son-in-law.

Reader, our tale is told. We are not done with an account of Black Raven's marvelous exploits at a later period following the adventures detailed in this narrative. He was called to New York on a great case, and in a future story our readers shall learn more of the wonderful man who for a season was the terror of the mooners.

THE END.

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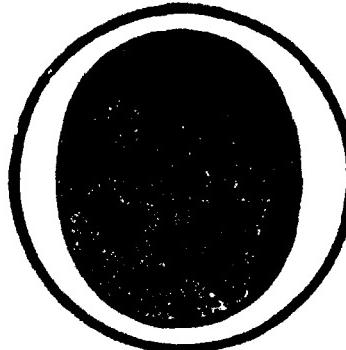
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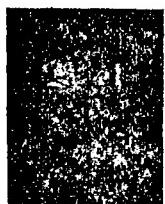
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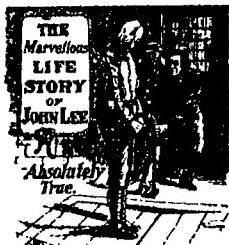
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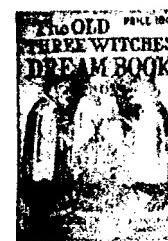
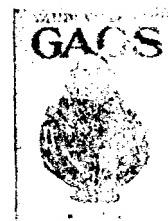
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